



Policy Design and Institutional Resistance to Reform: The Case of Institutional Governance Reform in Italian Universities

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Abstract

This paper examines the implementation of a New Public Management reform aimed at reshaping the internal governance of Italian public universities. It applies a policy design framework to analyse how the reform (Law 240/2010) interacted with the organisational characteristics and the responses of universities during implementation. While the reform sought transform universities into corporate actors, the nature of the policy design allowed universities wide discretion in its implementation. Consequently, many institutions maintained traditional decision-making structures, leading to an imbalance in the distribution of authority and persistent internal fragmentation. The findings show that the incoherent design of the reform allowed for a variety of organisational responses beyond compliance, as selective coupling and manipulation. The study concludes that governance reforms in higher education can be effective only when policy goals are matched with clear, non-discretionary instruments, and when the design anticipates the historical resilient nature universities.

Keywords Implementation gap · Policy design · Governance · New public management · Organisational response

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Introduction

In recent decades, many higher education (HE) systems have undergone significant governance reforms inspired by the principles of New Public Management (NPM) (Paradeise et al., 2009). A central pillar of NPM — common to several European countries — has been state-led intervention in institutional governance to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability by promoting a verticalisation and rationalisation of internal structures to mirror corporate models and reconfiguring universities as strategic organisations (Huisman, 2009; Amaral et al., 2013; Shattock, 2014; Seeber et al., 2015; Capano and Pritoni, 2019, 2020).

These reforms reflect a broader assumption within NPM that traditional collegial modes of decision-making are slow, inefficient, and resistant to change to meet the challenges of globally competitive HE. Reform advocates contended that universities needed strong, centralised leadership selected through external appointment, capable of overcoming internal fragmentation and strategic inertia. Governing boards increasingly incorporated non-academic members tasked with overseeing financial and strategic direction (Bleiklie, 2018). The underlying expectation was that weakening shared governance and strengthening executive leadership would result in more unified, goal-oriented, and self-governing institutions (Krücken and Meier, 2006).

However, the implementation of these reforms has frequently fallen short of expectations, revealing a persistent “implementation gap” between policy objectives and actual outcomes (Ongaro and Valotti, 2008; Hupe and Hill, 2016; Dan et al., 2024). At the same time, various studies suggest that the effectiveness of redesigning universities’ governance is related to the manner in which reforms are developed. For example, reforms were accompanied by coherent designs, which linked autonomy with accountability. This reduced universities’ discretionary space for interpretation/implementation. This was the case in several countries such as the Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark (De Boer et al., 2007; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Brøgger et al., 2023).

Furthermore, empirical evidence shows that the most effective reforms are those that clearly and coherently establish a new system of institutional governance, rather than searching for hybrid forms or incremental changes to existing arrangements (Gornitzka et al., 2017; Hüther and Krücken, 2018; Donina and Hasanefendic, 2019; Zsatku and Kovats, 2023). This often creates a misalignment between the reform goals and the organisational peculiarities of universities, particularly their embedded multiple institutional logics and resilient nature (Pinheiro and Young, 2017; Christensen et al., 2020; Donina and Jaworska, 2024). Thus, it is becoming clear that the design of the policy intervention, i.e. the reform, can make a difference.

In particular, when incoherent reforms overlook universities’ organisational peculiarities, universities might adopt nonlinear responses like manipulation, avoidance, selective coupling (Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2013), rather than straightforward compliance.

This dynamic is particularly evident in the Italian context. Law 240/2010, driven by the NPM paradigm (Donina et al., 2015; Capano et al., 2017), aimed to change

the traditional distributive and consensus-based decision-making style of universities by empowering boards and rectors while curtailing the influence of collegial bodies (Capano, 2011). However, the formalisation of these principles in Law 240 was marked by a significant degree of autonomy granted to universities in implementing the reform objectives. The new governance arrangements were implemented using the same corporative and collegial governance that they aimed to change, leaving the solution to the problem to be solved. Consequently, as this analysis will confirm, many universities retained elements of traditional governance structures and the envisaged empowerment of university boards largely failed to materialise. Furthermore, the internal organisation of larger universities remains highly fragmented, which complicates coordination and limits the strategic management of key activities.

Why did this occur? Previous studies have documented how Italian universities adapted selectively to New Public Management (NPM) reforms, often through disciplinary mediation (Reale and Seeber, 2011). At the same time, comparative evidence also shows, across different contexts, that universities can strategically handle institutional pressures through avoidance, manipulation, or selective coupling (Blaschke et al., 2014; Canhilal et al., 2016; Barbato, 2025). Our approach recognises these insights while emphasising that the design of reforms matters.

Specifically, we argue that “policy design” — understood as the deliberate alignment of policy goals with appropriate instruments (Howlett et al., 2015) — plays a critical role in shaping reform outcomes. Specifically, we apply the conceptual framework developed by Capano and Lepori (2024), which characterises policy design spaces along two key dimensions: the ideational content of reforms and the functions of policy instruments. By linking these dimensions to the literature on organisational responses (Oliver, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache and Santos, 2013), this framework — operationalised through an in-depth qualitative analysis of the governance of Italian public universities — demonstrates empirically why the design of the Italian reform (Law 240/2010) was not aligned with the peculiar characteristics of universities, and why their responses to implementation were inconsistent with the objectives of policymakers. Ultimately, this article reveals that the lack of a coherent and enforceable design of the Italian reform (Reale and Primeri, 2014), as well as its inability to recognise and accommodate the peculiarities of universities, led to a persistent implementation gap.

Theoretical Framework: The Characteristics of Policy Design Spaces as Drivers of Effective Reform

A consolidating stream of research in public policy highlights how the characteristics of policy design significantly impact the probability of effective implementation. This literature focuses on how policies can be uniquely designed and how these differences can be grasped through the concept of policy design space. This originates in design studies (Hillier and Leaman, 1974) and has been borrowed from policy scholars (Linder and Peters, 1991; Howlett et al., 2015; Capano, 2018; Chindrakar

et al., 2022) to define the set of possible solutions to a particular policy problem according to specific contextual/structural factors.

The concept of policy design has been developed in various ways by focusing on different dimensions, like technical or political capacity, governmental will, and capacity (Howlett et al., 2015; Capano, 2018; Chindrakar et al., 2022). Recently, this concept has been adopted to investigate the connection between the content of policy design and the organisations' responses in charge of implementation. We refer to the work of Capano and Lepori (2024), who connected policy design space theorisation with the organisational literature, stressing the variety of responses that organisations can give to external pressures (Oliver, 1991; Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache and Santos, 2013). We use this framework for analysing the Italian reform of university governance (Law 240/2010) by assuming that:

1. Universities contain different institutional logics (bureaucratic, professional, managerial) that can determine how they respond to external stimulus (Lepori, 2016; Canhilal et al., 2016) and are resilient institutions (Maassen and Olsen, 2007; Paradeise, et al., 2009; Whitley, 2012).
2. As any public organisation, universities should be expected to respond to external stimulus according to two potentially conflicting principles: dependence on resources and the search for legitimacy (Suchman, 1995; Pfeffer and Salancik, 2003; Fowles, 2014). Universities might simply comply to avoid losing external resources (e.g. funding). Yet, under certain internal dynamics, they might privilege the search for internal legitimacy (Capano and Lippi, 2017; Geschwind 2019).
3. Universities' responses depend on the interaction between their characteristics and the content of the designed policies. Consequently, they can comply (Ahrens and Khalifa, 2015) but also pursue strategies like avoidance, manipulation, and selective coupling (Greenwood et al., 2011; Pache and Santos, 2013).

According to these assumptions, we expect that the reform design seeking to change universities' governance should be characterised by a strong demand for compliance. However, this is not necessarily the case, since the content of the reform depends on the design spaces where it is approved.

Capano and Lepori (2024) suggest two dimensions of policymaking spaces that can be dichotomised and are relevant in terms of interaction with universities' organisational aspects: the ideational content and the function of policy instruments.

- (I) The ideational content can be homogeneous or heterogeneous. In the former case, it is designed according to a hegemonic, shared set of ideas of all stakeholders about what the problems are and how to solve them. Conversely, where there are different and conflicting paradigms or beliefs about problems and solutions, the ideational content is heterogeneous. A homogeneous ideational piece of content implies coherence in the design and a high level of stakeholder support, while heterogeneous content implies that the design will be incoherent because it is based on a compromise of different values and ideas.

- (II) Policy instruments can present a symbolic/normative or a pragmatic function. The symbolic function relates to how they can establish values or a cognitive perspective, whereas the pragmatic function captures how policy instruments can directly influence organisations to comply, following a rationalistic standpoint. These functions can apply to the same instruments, depending on how they are designed with respect to the implementation stage. For instance, a regulation can be more or less symbolic/normative or pragmatic, depending on the presence or absence of a certain sanction and/or monitoring, while a performance funding scheme can have a more or less pragmatic function depending on its financial impact on the policy objective.

Figure 1 presents the policy design spaces underlying the dichotomisation of the two dimensions. The four design spaces present the following features if analysed in terms of policy design committed to changing universities' governance.

In the coherent and pragmatic space (Q1), policies are based on a shared understanding of both problems and solutions, with clear, directly applicable instruments (e.g. detailed regulations). Universities are expected to implement decisions without significant interpretation. Compliance dominates with limited local discretion.

The coherent but symbolic/normative space (Q2) assumes that universities will align with common ideational goals while adapting their implementation to their specific context. Though broadly compliant, institutions may seek internal compromises — such as preserving academic self-governance (e.g. Senate's powers). The result is a relatively uniform response with local variation (selective coupling).

In the incoherent yet pragmatic space (Q3), despite the use of binding tools (regulations, incentives), inconsistent policy goals result in mixed signals.

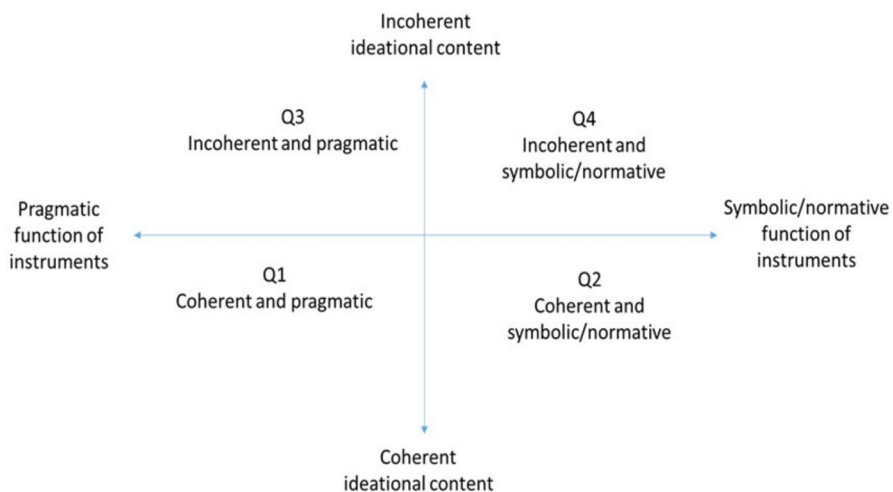


Fig. 1 Types of policy design spaces. *Source:* Capano and Lepori (2024, 60)

Universities may comply formally but anticipate future changes, which can result in avoidance or resistance. This reflects internal disagreements among policy-makers on policy objectives, leading to unstable implementation and negotiations with implementers.

Finally, the incoherent and symbolic/normative space (Q4) gives universities wide interpretive freedom. Lacking a clear ideational framework, institutions adapt policies to fit their internal dynamics and legacy structures. This can maintain internal legitimacy but risks undermining reform goals, as universities comply only superficially while avoiding substantive changes.

The Policy Design of the Italian Reform

The Ideational Content

The reform of the institutional governance of Italian universities (Law 240/2010) entered the political agenda in the early 2000s, driven by dissatisfaction with the first decade of university autonomy introduced in the '90s (Capano et al., 2017). Universities struggled, indeed, to move beyond a consensual, distributive, self-governance model. While there was agreement among the main actors (universities, political actors, and the business sector) on the need for reform, tensions emerged over its design (Reale and Primeri, 2014). Though the principles of NPM were partially accepted, universities sought to retain autonomy in defining the structure of their internal governance. For instance, the Italian Rectors' Conference opposed having a majority of external members on the Board of Governors (BoG) to preserve institutional autonomy. When the government presented the bill in parliament, it faced strong opposition, especially from politicised students and researchers. They viewed the proposal as a threat to the public mission and democratic governance of universities. The main opposition party capitalised on the protests, opposing the bill despite previously supporting similar measures. Consequently, the law's ideological foundation was mixed, and the final law represented a hybrid model (Donina et al., 2015): it introduced strict regulations (e.g. on academics' recruitment) to address previous abuses of autonomy (Agasisti et al., 2024) but also allowed universities significant discretion regarding the rules for redesigning their governance (Capano et al., 2017).

The Function of Policy Instruments

Firstly, Law 240 aimed to increase verticalisation of power and decision-making to boost efficiency and effectiveness by enhancing the role of the Rector and the BoG at the expense of the Senate. The law introduced detailed rules regarding governance bodies, their composition, and functions. The reform changed the role of Rectors, who, while still elected, could now come from other universities. Limits were imposed on their mandate: 6 years, non-renewable. Rectors became strategic drivers of teaching and research, moving away from the prior role as "primus inter pares".

The BoG was assigned strategic roles and powers over budgets, planning, establishment/termination of degree programmes, and hiring decisions on academics. Its composition was capped at eleven members, including the Rector and student representatives. A certain number of members must now be “external” to the university (two or three, depending on the BoG’s size). BoG’s members should be selected according to a process of “designation or choice” left to the decision of universities. Apparently, the law does not permit them to elect these members; however, in some universities, the Statutes provide for their election (see Fig. 3). Finally, the law allows universities to choose who chairs the BoG (Rector or another member).

The Senate saw its powers significantly reduced. Besides the possibility of proposing a motion of no confidence against the Rector, Law 240 drastically reduced the matters on which the Senate has decisional powers while giving it the right to make proposals or prepare opinions on most matters regarding the BoG. Before the reform, the Senate consisted of the Deans of Faculties. However, this situation led to an ongoing consensus-driven decision-making since each Dean represented the interests of its community. With the reform, the legislator aimed to reduce the Senate’s influence by assigning it to represent the entire academic community. Therefore, the Senate is currently an elected body with a maximum of 35 members, including the Rector and students. At least two-thirds of its members must be tenured lecturers, of whom at least one-third are Heads of Departments. Universities can freely choose the rules for implementing this provision.

Secondly, the reform aimed to rationalise internal organisational structures by abolishing Faculties and assigning to Departments functions that were related not only to research but also to academic recruitment and teaching, previously under the responsibility of Faculties. Each new Department must consist of no fewer than 35 (40 in the case of larger universities) lecturers and researchers working in the same disciplinary areas (not specifically defined). The law makes no provision to penalise universities that fail to meet this threshold. Additionally, Law 240 allows universities to create up to twelve “liaison structures” among Departments grouped together according to disciplinary similarities, with the task of coordinating teaching activities. Table I in the Online Supplementary Materials synthesises the role/composition of the governing bodies and structures before and after Law 240/2010.

Therefore, the reform combines NPM principles with traditional academic values, resulting in a mixed ideational content. Its instruments might first appear as pragmatic (see numerical thresholds), but they are heavily symbolic in allowing wide discretion during implementation. Consequently, the reform can be classified as belonging to Q4 of Capano and Lepori’s framework (Fig. 2). This means that we may expect organisational responses characterised not only by compliance but also by manipulation, selective coupling, avoidance, following the characteristics of this design space. These considerations lead to some expectations on the implementation outcomes:

- *Expectation#1:* In the composition of the new BoG, most universities will not exceed the minimum number of external members.

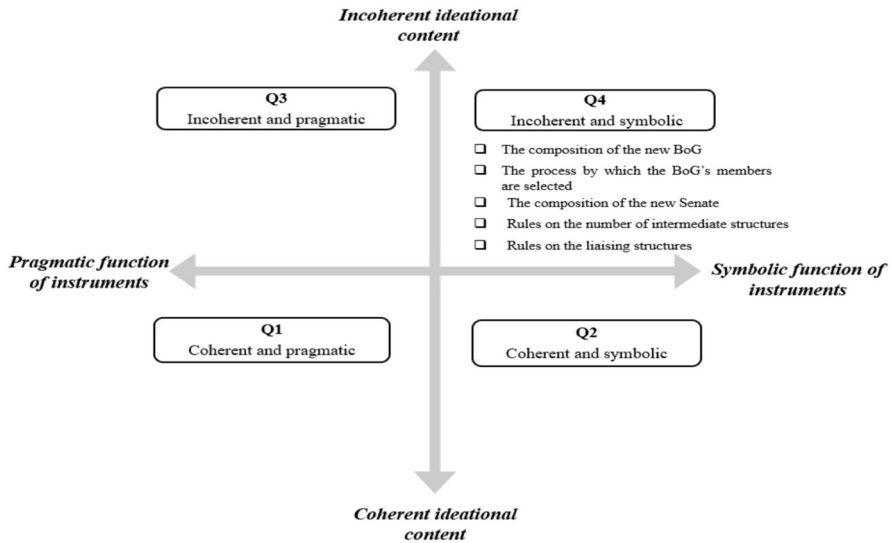


Fig. 2 The design space of the Italian reform on universities' governance (Law 240/2010). *Source:* authors' elaboration

- *Expectation #2:* The appointment process of BoG members will be predominantly characterised by a logic of representing internal constituencies and driven by academic bodies.
- *Expectation #3:* In the composition of the new Senate, universities will strive to maximise the representation of Departments.
- *Expectation#4:* The number of new Departments will be lower than the number of Departments before the reform, but higher than the number of old Faculties.
- *Expectation#5:* The role of the newly formed liaison structures will be generally weak, and many universities will not activate them.

Research Design

To evaluate whether Law 240/2010 has fulfilled its goals, we collected data on the implementation of the five pivotal rules allowing universities autonomy during implementation:

- I. The composition of the new (i.e. post-Law 240/2010) BoG
- II. The appointment of BoG's members
- III. The composition of the new Senate
- IV. The creation of the new intermediate structures (Departments, Liaison structures)
- V. The role of the liaison structures

The data collection process was centred on the universities' statutes, as they formally define governance arrangements. The Statutes adopted after the reform, thus, display how universities implemented the five rules.

The data collection process focused on 61 public universities (private institutions were not affected by the reform), generating a snapshot in December 2024. A data extract form was used to collect the information and generate the descriptive statistics illustrated in section "[Findings](#)".

Moreover, as detailed in section "[An Exploratory Assessment of the Effects of the Reformed Governance on Teaching Coordination](#)", data were collected for two case studies to exploratorily investigate the effect of the reformed governance on the coordination of teaching activities. The five rules have been operationalised as follows:

(I) Composition of the new BoGs

First, by screening the Statutes, we identified all the BoG's members, distinguishing between internal members — presenting a formal affiliation to the university — and external ones — not presenting a formal affiliation. Additionally, we verified whether universities decided to prescribe administrative staff's representatives as BoG members. These elements allow us to verify whether universities opened their BoG towards external stakeholders or the BoG predominantly represents internal constituencies.

Secondly, we verified whether the Rector is also the chairman of the BoG since Law 240 allows for other options. A Rector acting as chairman of the BoG would indeed acquire significant power in steering the BoG.

(II) Appointment process of BoGs' members

Investigating how BoG's members — internal and external — are appointed is crucial to understanding whether the BoG is independent from the other governance bodies, particularly those representing the academic community. Hence, we inductively and qualitatively examined the Statutes by revealing different types of procedures:

- “Rector's appointment”
- “Senate's appointment”
- “Joint Rector and Senate's appointment”
- “Other bodies' appointment”
- “Election by peers” (only internal members)

(III) Composition of the new Senate

We searched for the prescriptions in the Statutes on the members that have the right to be part of the Senate. Here, the reform provided clear indications (see section "[The function of policy instruments](#)"). So, we deductively distinguished the following categories of the Senate's members: “Students”; “Administrative staff”; “Academics”; and “Heads of Department”. Furthermore, by computing how many Departments over the total are represented in the Senate (through their Heads), we

verified whether universities overcome the historical composition of the Senate as body representing the internal structures (the Faculties before the reform).

(IV) The creation of the new intermediate structures

The comparison between the number of intermediate structures (Departments, Faculties, liaison structures) before and after the implementation of Law 240 highlights whether the simplification goal has been achieved following the universities' implementation. To collect these data, we relied on secondary data (Capano and Regini, 2015), and original data obtained by screening universities' Statutes and websites in November–December 2024.

We then computed descriptive statistics and compared data in 2014, 2020, and 2024, without finding significant differences. Therefore, in section "Findings", we will provide findings on the 2009–2024 comparison. (The other years are presented in the Online Supplementary Materials.)

(V) The role and power of the new liaison structures

We scrutinised the Statutes of those universities (30) that established at least one liaison structure, by focusing on the role granted to them in five domains:

- I. "Coordination of common services/activities" (e.g. establishment of the academic calendar, the organisation of tutoring services, etc.)
- II. "Annual planning of teaching activities"
- III. "Approval of degree programs regulation"
- IV. "Establishment and termination of degree programs"
- V. "Planning and recruitment of academic staff"

These domains are particularly meaningful since they were under the responsibility of the Faculties before Law 240. Hence, through a qualitative and inductive analysis, we frame the role of the liaison structures in each domain and attributed a level of power as follows:

- "Absent": The liaison structure has no role.
- "Weak": The role is limited to merely coordinating the Departments' decisions or providing non-binding opinions.
- "Medium": The liaison structure has some leverage to modify Departments' decisions (e.g. it can require that Departments respect predetermined requisites) or it displays some proposal powers.
- "Strong": The liaison structure can significantly influence departmental decisions (e.g. Departments must review their proposals after receiving the liaison structure's opinion).

Understanding the role of the liaison structures allows us to understand whether universities have made substantive use of the legislative opportunity or have implemented these structures in a ceremonial way. Strong liaison structures can indeed support coordination, limiting the fragmentation of decisions.

An Exploratory Assessment of the Effects of the Reformed Governance on Teaching Coordination

Law 240 abolished Faculties based on the idea that shifting responsibilities to Departments could simplify the coordination and management of teaching activities. Therefore, we focused on how teaching coordination/management has changed after the reform to explore the impact of the reformed governance. We collected data on two case studies — two mega-sized universities (anonymised as Uni-Alpha and Uni-Beta) — that established liaison structures. These universities are similar in the number of Departments (around 30), liaison structures (around 10), and degree programmes (140 in Uni-Alpha, 180 in Uni-Beta). Data were collected on the following aspects of all the programmes of the two universities, referring to the academic year 2023–2024:

- The responsible and associated Department(s) of a programme
- The teaching staff involved in a programme and their affiliated Department
- The liaison structures involved in the programme

In Italian universities, teaching is organised under programmes, each consisting of one responsible Department and one or more “associated” Departments. The responsible Department must provide most of the teaching staff to the programme, manage the financial resources, and coordinate with associated Departments. Each programme also contains a collegial body and a coordinator from the responsible Department. Hence, these data may highlight how teaching is organised among Departments and whether coordination issues arise.

Findings

The results are provided according to the five rules. The data were analysed, when feasible, considering university size¹ (Number of students enrolled) to identify potential differences. Hypothesis tests are provided only when statistically significant.

BoGs’ Composition After the Reform

Table 1 shows that almost all universities appointed the minimum number of external members (two/three) required by Law 240. In large- and mega-sized universities, the mean number of external members is approximately 2.5, whereas this value is lower for smaller institutions. The mean of external members is slightly higher for medium-sized universities, primarily due to three outliers.

¹ Small: 10,000 students; medium: 10,000–20,000; large: 20,000–40,000; mega-sized: from 40,000; 17 universities are small, 26 medium, 8 large, and 10 mega-sized.

Table 1 Means and medians of the number of BoGs internal/external members by university size

BoG's members	University size	Median	Mean	Standard dev.	Mean of the %
Internal*	Small	7	6.7	1.3	76.05
	Medium	8	7.3	1.4	71.17
	Large	8	7.8	0.3	76.08
	Mega	8	8	0	74.18
	Tot.	8	7.3	1.2	73.92
External**	Small	2	2	0.2	23.90
	Medium	3	2.8	1	28.20
	Large	2.5	2.5	0.5	23.90
	Mega	3	2.7	0.4	25.09
	Tot.	2	2.5	0.8	25.96

*Hypothesis test: $F = 2.84$; $df = 3$; p value = 0.045

**Hypothesis test: $F = 3.88$; $df = 3$; p value = 0.013

Additionally, 47 out of 61 universities appointed some representatives of the administrative staff as internal members (Table II, Online Supplementary Materials). Given that external members make up (on average) 25% of all members, the new BoGs still largely represent the main internal stakeholders.

Moreover, almost all universities (60 out of 61) established that the Rector is also the BoG's chairman.

BoGs' Appointing Procedures After the Reform

Figure 3 shows that in approximately 75% of universities, internal members are either appointed by the Senate (45%) or elected by their peers (29%). This percentage is higher when considering large (26%, 62%)- and mega-sized universities (50%,

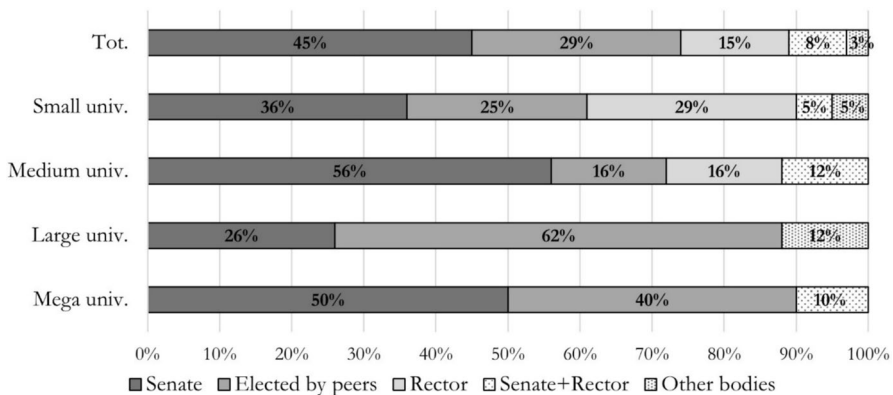


Fig. 3 Percentage of universities and appointment process of the BoG's internal members by university size

40%), whereas it is slightly lower (though higher than 50%) for smaller universities. Furthermore, in some small (29%)- and medium-sized (16%) universities, the Rector directly appoints internal members.

Concerning external members (Fig. 4), Senate appointments are present in 76% of large universities and in approximately 40% of mega- and medium-sized universities. Appointments by the Rector are present in 40% and 59% of mega-sized and small universities, respectively. In only a few universities (11%), bodies consisting of representatives from the local society/economy (*Other bodies*) appoint external members. Hence, the expected relevance and autonomy of the BoG are affected by the two most relevant academic bodies: the Senate and the Rector.

The Composition of the Senate After the Reform

Table 2 indicates that, on average, approximately 70% of the new Senate's members are academics, of whom approximately 35% are representatives of academic staff and 31% are department heads. Students (17%) and administrative staff's representatives (10%) constitute a minority.

However, in small- and medium-sized universities, the restricted number of new Departments (see Table 3) allowed universities to include nearly all Heads of Departments in the Senate, ultimately distorting the policymakers' goal. In contrast, in large- and mega-sized universities, only 63% and 44% of their departments are represented in the Senate due to a higher numerosity.

The Number of Intermediate Structures Before and After the Reform

Table 3 provides the average number of Departments and Faculties before the reform (2009), the number of Departments after its implementation (2024), and whether universities decided to establish liaison structures.

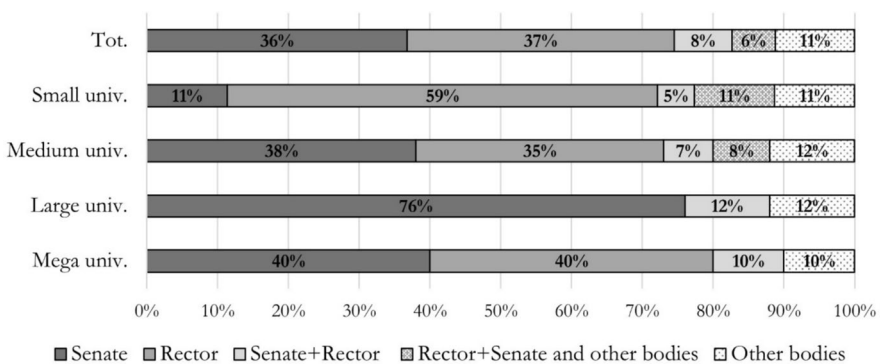


Fig. 4 Percentage of universities and appointment process of the BoG's external members by university size

Table 2 Types of academic senate members by university size: percentage values

Senate's member	University size	Mean (%)	Standard dev.
Administrative staff	Small	12	0.04
	Medium	9	0.03
	Large	8	0.01
	Mega	10	0.02
	Tot.	10	0.03
Students	Small	17	0.05
	Medium	16	0.02
	Large	17	0.01
	Mega	17	0.00
	Tot.	17	0.03
Academics	Small	36	0.10
	Medium	34	0.12
	Large	34	0.11
	Mega	37	0.10
	Tot.	35	0.11
Heads of Department*	Small	23	0.08
	Medium	35	0.12
	Large	35	0.12
	Mega	31	0.11
	Tot.	31	0.12
Percentage of Departments represented in Senate over the total**	Small	99	0.5
	Medium	81	0.2
	Large	63	0.3
	Mega	44	0.3
	Tot.	77	0.4

*Hypothesis test: $F = 4.28$; $df = 3$; p value = 0.008

**Hypothesis test: $F = 4.82$; $df = 3$; p value = 0.004

First, Table 3 shows that, on average, the number of new Departments is lower than the number of Departments in 2009 but significantly greater than the number of old Faculties (8.3 in 2009 and 12.5 in 2024). However, there are statistically significant differences among universities based on their size. The number of Faculties in 2009 and Departments in 2024 is almost identical in small- and medium-sized universities. These universities have probably turned their existing Faculties into new Departments. This picture evolved when considering large- and mega-sized universities, where the number of intermediate organisational structures doubled. For example, at mega-sized universities, there were, on average, 28 Departments in 2024 compared to approximately 14 Faculties in 2009. Hence, the expected rationalisation goal of Law 240 has been achieved only in small- and (to a lesser extent) medium-sized universities, whereas greater fragmentation has occurred in larger universities.

Table 3 Number of faculties, departments, and liaison structures in 2009 and 2024

Univ. size	Departments (2009)			Faculties (2009)			Departments (2024)			Liaison structures (2024)		
	Median	Mean	St. dev.	Median	Mean	St. dev.	Median	Mean	St. dev.	Median	Mean	St. dev.
Small	8	8.4	2.1	5	4.4	2.2	5	4.4	2.1	0	0.17	0.52
Medium	21.5	24.2	3.4	9	8.5	2.6	10.5	10.7	3.5	0.5	1	1.5
Large	29	32.6	5.1	9	9.5	3.1	16.5	17	4.6	2	2.8	2.4
Mega	60	58.4	10.3	12.5	13.8	5	26.5	27.4	12.3	5	5.8	4
Tot.	19	26.5	7.8	8	8.3	4.3	11	12.5	9.5	1	1.8	2.7
Hypothesis test	$F = 20.3$; $df = 3$;			$F = 19.6$; $df = 3$;			$F = 35.2$; $df = 3$;			$F = 21.9$; $df = 3$;		
	p value = 0.001			p value = 0.000			p value = 0.000			p value = 0.000		

Second, the reform granted universities the possibility of establishing one/more liaison structures to coordinate departments' teaching activities based on a common disciplinary background. However, Table 3 shows that this opportunity has been used only to a limited extent (only 50% of universities have established at least one liaison structure), with statistically significant differences across universities. While large- and mega-sized universities have established, on average, approximately 3 and 6 liaison structures, these structures are close to 0 with reference to smaller universities. Moreover, these structures have often been established only in specific subject areas, such as health or the natural sciences. (Nine universities have established only one structure corresponding to the old Faculty of Medicine.)

The Role and Power of the Liaison Structures

Figure 5 provides an overall picture of the role and power of the new liaison structures. (Tables V–IX in the Online Supplementary Materials specify the role and power for all five domains.)

The percentage of universities attributing a strong role to their liaison structures is clearly very low. This value is particularly limited regarding the establishment/termination of programmes (12%) and the planning/recruitment of academics (3%).

Apart from the coordination of common activities, in the other four domains, a significant share of universities (at least 40% and, on average, 59%) designed liaison structures with a weak or even absent role. This means that the liaison structures are basically coordinating the Departments without significant powers of controlling and steering.

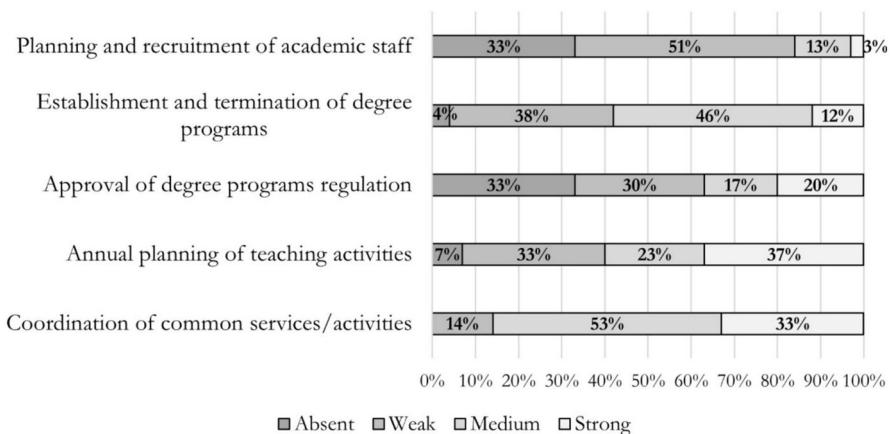


Fig. 5 Percentage of universities with liaison structures according to their level of power and for each domain

The Coordination of Teaching Activities After Law 240/2010: Two Case Studies

Before the reform, both Uni-Alfa and Uni-Beta had approximately 10 Faculties in charge of managing teaching. After the reform, this task was entrusted to approximately 30 Departments, with the support of around 10 liaison structures, which play a medium or weak role in domains such as academics' recruitment and the assignment of professors to courses. This leads to a fragmentation of the teaching offer depicted in Fig. 6.

First, approximately 40% of the programmes at Uni-Alfa and Uni-Beta present 75% of their teaching staff coming from the responsible Department of the programme. These programmes reflect the mission and focus of a department. For instance, the "Physics" and "Philosophy" programmes mirror equivalent Departments. Here, the coordination of teaching occurs at the same level as the management of human resources and research.

Second, another 30% of the programmes contain a significant share of teaching staff (25–50%) that do not come from the responsible Department. These programmes have a broader disciplinary spectrum than current Departments do (e.g. the programmes in "Political science" or "Biology" for Uni-Alpha, and almost all the Engineering programmes for Uni-Beta).

Third, in the remaining share of the programmes (26% for Uni-Beta, 32% for Uni-Alpha), over 50% of the teaching staff do not come from the responsible Department. This is the case, e.g. of Uni-Alpha's "Biotechnology" programme, which involves up to 13 departments, with the responsible Department contributing less than 20% of the professors, or the "Law" programme, which involves the equal participation of three Law Departments. Similar cases can also be found at Uni-Beta (e.g. "Law and technology" and "Science and technology for the land and environment", where 5 associated Departments provide 80% of the teaching staff).

For the second and third scenarios, teaching management is highly fragmented and not only partially controlled by responsible Departments. Human resource management, especially academics' recruitment, is disconnected from teaching needs,

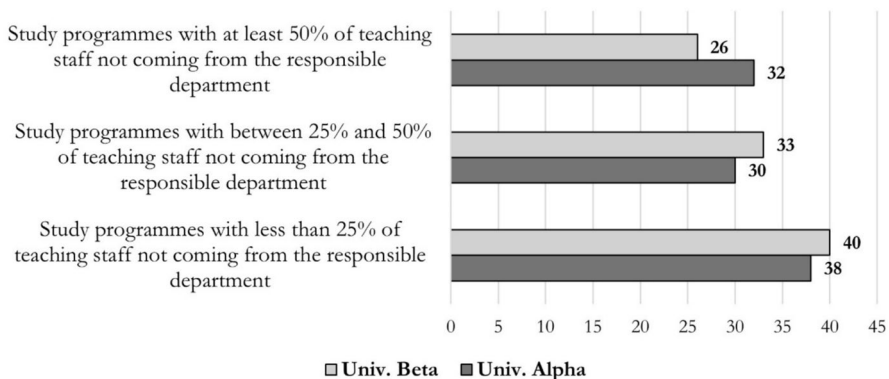


Fig. 6 Percentage of Uni-Alpha and Uni-Beta programmes according to the share of teaching staff not coming from the responsible Department

hampering long-term planning and leading to tensions between the programme, particularly its coordinator, and the Departments.

The role of programme coordinator becomes particularly significant because they are tasked with negotiating the availability of professors with Departments. However, the coordinator has less power than the Heads of Departments do, and the liaison structure (which should facilitate negotiation) is weak.

Discussion

According to the typology of policy design spaces developed by Capano and Lepori (2024), we classified the design of the Italian reform in the category incoherent/symbolic. This categorisation, which implies different responses beyond mere compliance (e.g. selective coupling, avoidance, and manipulation), led us to formulate expectations regarding the implementation outcomes of five key rules of the reform (section "The Function of Policy Instruments"). These are particularly meaningful because they set thresholds (e.g. on the composition of BoG/Senate, on the size of Departments) but left universities' discretion in implementing them.

The findings of the analysis confirmed all five expectations, synthesised in Table 4, underscoring that the design of the abovementioned rules could not address universities' behaviour towards the expected outcomes.

Regarding the composition of the BoG, the threshold of 11 members did not address the main problem that policymakers sought to resolve, namely making the BoG an independent and less self-referential body capable of providing strategic guidance. As illustrated in section "BoGs' Composition After the Reform", post-reform BoGs are composed predominantly of internal members (with the presence of the administrative staff's representatives too) and (almost always) present the minimum number of external members.

Regarding the appointment procedures of the BoG, it is essential to note that while policymakers were convinced that the law mandated an appointive system to select internal members, the way the rule was written left room for interpretation, allowing universities to opt for an elective system. The first to do so was the Polytechnic of Turin, against which the Ministry of Universities appealed to the National Administrative Court but lost. This opened the door to a broad interpretation of the rule, which has been followed by almost one-third of the universities. In the other universities, internal members are mostly appointed by the Senate or the Rector. Given that the Rector chairs the BoG in all universities (except for one), the person in charge of the university's executive power — who also strongly influences the composition of the BoG in various ways — is also the chair of the body that should adopt strategic decisions. Clearly, this institutional design creates an unbalanced distribution of power, placing the Rector above the BoG. Moreover, since BoG's internal members are dependent on internal bodies (the community, the Senate, and the Rector) for their legitimacy, it is reasonable to expect them to behave in a way that reflects a sense of accountability to their sponsors. Therefore, on the one hand, universities were compliant with the law by meeting the threshold on external members. On the other hand, some universities purposively decided to make the

Table 4 Rules, expectations, organisational responses, and outcomes of the reform implementation. *Source:* authors' elaboration

Rules	Expectation	Organisational responses	Outcomes
(I) Composition of the BoG	[...] most universities will not exceed the minimum number of external members	Compliance but also selective coupling	Internal members continue to be the majority of the BoG
(II) Appointment of BoG's members	The appointment process will be predominantly characterised by a logic of representing the various internal constituencies and driven by the academic bodies	Compliance but also manipulation	The BoG is less independent than expected
(III) Composition of the Senate	[...] universities will try to maximise the representation of the Departments	Compliance but also manipulation	Internal members are selected in accordance with internal logics and dynamics
			An unbalanced distribution of powers placing the Rector above the BoG
(IV) The creation of Departments and liaison structures	The number of the new Departments will be lower than the number of Departments before the reform but higher than the number of old faculties	Compliance but also avoidance and selective coupling	Prevalence of Heads of Department in small/medium-sized universities
			Complex interdepartmental negotiations and ongoing compromises in larger universities
			The threshold on the size of Departments did not avoid increasing internal fragmentation
(V) The role/power of liaison structures	The role of the new liaison structures will be generally weak, and many universities will not activate them	Compliance but also selective coupling	Greater number of internal structures interacting with governing bodies (i.e. a more complex decision-making) in larger universities
			Liaison structures are loose bodies for the coordination of Departments and suffer interdepartmental negotiations

appointment of their internal members subject to the control of the academic bodies, generating a selective coupling (Pache and Santos, 2013).

Similarly, other universities have sought to proactively “manipulate” (Oliver, 1991) certain elements of the reform to make it more aligned with the traditional academic logic. This is the case of those universities that opted for an elective system to reaffirm the principle of academic self-governance.

Regarding the composition of the new Senate, the findings highlight that this rule is complied with by universities when internal legitimacy is not involved (Ahrens and Khalifa, 2015). This is the case in small- or medium-sized universities where the implementation of the reform has been essentially cosmetic, transforming existing Faculties into Departments. Consequently, all the Heads of Departments can become members of the Senate. This maintains the continuity of the previous situation in which the Senate had a strong role, also because each Faculty had the right to membership. By contrast, in large and mega-universities, the prescription of Law 240, along with the higher number of new departments, limits the number of Heads of Departments who can be elected to the Senate. This leads to a peculiar imbalance between small/medium-sized universities and large/mega-sized universities. In the latter case, Senate candidates are the result of complex interdepartmental negotiations (to ensure that the interests of excluded Departments are not compromised). Furthermore, more recent reforms of the Statutes have established that Heads of Departments who are not elected to the Senate can attend meetings, even without the right to vote. Hence, the rule is respected (and even manipulated) due to the need to maintain internal legitimacy and avoid conflict.

With reference to the implementation of the new Departments, although universities have complied with the rules about the minimum size, the way in which they have been implemented has also led to avoidance and selective coupling behaviours (Capano and Lepori, 2024). On the one hand, small- and medium-sized universities strategically transformed the old Faculties into the new Departments. So, they are formally complying with what is requested by the policy intervention (the rule on the minimum size of the Department) while maintaining existing organisational practices (Townley [2002] referred to this as “avoidance”). On the other hand, the threshold for minimum size and the lack of a clear definition of disciplinary homogeneity have led to a dramatic increase in the number of Departments in larger universities, as this process has been driven by a bottom-up approach (negotiations, power dynamics, etc.) rather than clear top-down rules. This resulted in an increasing fragmentation of university internal structures. Moreover, as suggested by the two case studies (Uni-Alpha and Uni-Beta) on the management of teaching activities, this increasing fragmentation is a driver of inefficient decision-making. Hence, these thresholds were developed without regard to the organisational implications for universities and their structural features (size).

Finally, concerning the role of the liaison structures, their design is intrinsically weak because the legislative provision offers universities the opportunity to maintain something that is simultaneously abolished by the same law. While the law allows universities to maintain a second-level structure to replace the abolished Faculties (the liaison structures), it only gives these structures the power to coordinate teaching activities. In the context of a law that assigns all the power on every

subject to the Departments, the creation of the liaison structure would have been a problematic choice, and only the large- and mega-sized universities could have been interested in this legislative opportunity. Moreover, the findings indicate that most of these structures, where they have been created to be compliant with the law, are characterised by weak powers (i.e. a clear expression of a selective coupling), since they are essentially loose bodies for the coordination of Departments in common/service activities (e.g. the definition of teaching calendar). They are also a direct expression of interdepartmental negotiation, meaning that their role in policymaking for teaching activities is simply to implement the decisions of member Departments. As exemplified by the cases of Uni-Alpha and Uni-Beta, the presence of these structures does not facilitate the process of managing teaching, which is time-consuming and subject to ongoing negotiations.

Overall, this analysis suggests that the reform design failed to foresee those organisational responses necessary for effective implementation. The incoherent design allowed, instead, universities to implement without changing too much with respect to the inherited legacy (Facchini and Fia, 2021). Overall, the principle of academic self-governance still prevails in the new governance arrangements of universities as previously witnessed. The final outcome of the reform is, therefore, far from the expected streamlining of universities' corporate behaviour.

However, it should also be noted that resistance did not only arise at the organisational level. Influential disciplinary networks and well-positioned individuals within the academic profession were able to shape the design and local implementation of the reform (Musselin, 2007; Capano and Regini, 2015). This emphasises the dual role of organisations and professions in determining the outcome of reforms.

Paradoxically, Italian universities are now more fragmented and face more problems in framing their internal decision-making processes (as exploratorily witnessed regarding teaching), strategic capacity, and positioning (Capano et al., 2017; Barbato, 2025). This increased fragmentation is counterbalanced only by the expanding role of the Rector.

In the system that existed before the reform, Rectors were officially the "first among equals" but, in reality, they could accumulate significant informal authority through repeated re-elections and long-term personal networks (Capano, 2008, 2011). However, Law 240 radically altered this balance by granting the Rector extensive formal powers, including control over the composition of the BoG and strategic agenda-setting, while simultaneously introducing a single non-renewable mandate. Paradoxically, this strengthened the role of Rectors by freeing them from the need to secure internal consensus for re-election. This enabled them to exercise authority with fewer constraints and limited accountability.

Conclusions

The outcomes of reforms to university governance have often fallen short of expectations, revealing a recurring discrepancy between policy objectives and actual outcomes. This "implementation gap" (Ongaro and Valotti, 2008) has been investigated using various analytical factors and models, such as the influence of disciplinary

traditions (Reale and Seeber, 2011), the continued dominance of the academic profession (Musselin, 2007), and the coexistence of conflicting institutional logics (Blaschke et al., 2014; Canhilal et al., 2016; Barbato, 2025). While these accounts are undeniably relevant, they alone do not comprehensively explain the contradictory dynamics observed in Italy. The concept of “policy design space”, adopted and empirically operationalized here (Capano and Lepori, 2024), offers additional explanatory leverage by clarifying how incoherent and symbolic instruments created opportunities for selective interpretation during reform implementation.

Hence, this paper contributes to the literature in two ways. First, we empirically demonstrated the vital importance of reforms’ design in achieving the intended outcomes. At the same time, we emphasised that organisational’ responses to reforms (as individual ones, see, for example, Leon and Vega [2021]) are pivotal in aligning or misaligning policy implementations with policymakers’ expectations. Indeed, this type of reform can be effective either by considering the peculiarities of universities or by relying on coherent and stringent designs. The Italian reform failed on both counts, which is why its transformative impact was limited.

The findings of empirical analysis suggest that the Italian reform was inappropriately designed due to its ideational incoherence and mainly symbolic policy instruments. This allowed universities to choose not only compliance but also other organisational responses (see Table 4). Consequently, the outcome of the reform is far from what policymakers expected, generating both an implementation gap and dysfunctional issues, as pointed by the increasing organisational fragmentation and the related coordination issues.

By contrast, in several European countries (e.g. the Netherlands, Finland, and Denmark), governance reforms were underpinned by coherent and purposively crafted policy designs that tightly linked autonomy with accountability. Effective systemic coordination was fostered by these designs, and the ability of universities to reinterpret, negotiate, or adapt reform directives according to their own organisational specifics was significantly limited (De Boer et al., 2007; Pinheiro et al., 2014; Brøgger et al., 2023). In contrast, the coexistence of ideational incoherence and symbolic rather than pragmatic policy instruments in Italy created fertile ground for local reinterpretation, ultimately resulting in a persistent implementation gap.

In short, the Italian example shows that governance reforms can only be successful when they are designed with coherence and contextual intelligence in mind. Coherence requires consistent alignment between reform objectives, policy instruments, and implementation processes. Contextual intelligence necessitates acknowledging how universities’ professional and institutional logics influence their responses to external pressures. The findings show that when reforms are incoherent and rely on symbolic rather than pragmatic instruments, universities tend to preserve inherited practices and values rather than embracing substantive change. This dynamic reflects design flaws and the inherent limits of the New Public Management (NPM) paradigm, which assumes that managerial rationalisation can replace collegial coordination in complex professional organisations. The growing trend towards re-regulation of university systems in many countries (Capano and Pritoni, 2020) can therefore be seen as a response to the limited transformative capacity of NPM-inspired governance reforms in the 1990s and 2000s. Future research should build

on the empirical evidence presented here to improve our understanding of why such models often produce only partial or symbolic change (Capano and Jarvis, 2020). Therefore, the challenge for policymakers is to design governance arrangements that are both disciplined and adaptive — capable of steering universities without undermining their institutional complexity.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the author(s).

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