The Reform: Higher Education System and the Roots

Marco Sepper

Initiative in Spain
The International Campus of Excellence

Home: Consultor financial d.o.l. (Spain) and CEPES, University of Seville.

Don’t Westernize in Spain. Green and Black Associates, University of Seville.

The Spanish Higher Education System: The Roots of Reform

The International Campus of Excellence
transferred the direct responsibility over universities to the autonomous regions, although the devolution process was fully completed only in 1997 (Mora et al., 2000).

In order to increase access to higher education as well as due to the transfer of competences to the regions, the number of universities grew from 28 to 75 in the period from 1978 to 2005 (Delgado and Leon, 2015). From the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Spanish higher education, alike other higher education systems in Europe, was increasingly expected to become more competitive and international, as well as contributing to and interacting with the society and the economic sector (Rubialta, 2010). According to the interviews, there was a rather common understanding among policymakers and stakeholders that fragmentation — with 50 public institutions and 31 private centres scattered across 232 campuses and territorial sites — were major factors making the system expensive and inefficient, leading to multiplication of structures and course offerings, little differentiation and specialization, lack of critical mass. Overall, these elements were deemed to undermine the international attractiveness and visibility of the Spanish Higher Education (HE) system, as only one university was among the world’s top 200 universities in the Shanghai ranking and only 11 in the top 500.

In this context, the government of Spain introduced the Organic Law 4/2007 on Universities Organic Act Modifying the “Organic Act on Universities” (LOU (“LOMLOU” — State of Spain, 2007), which sets a new legal framework in order to implement the European Higher Education Area guidelines (EHEA) and modernize the Spanish university system, aligning with the European Commission’s recommendations included in the Modernization Agenda for Universities (European Commission, 2006).

THE DESIGN OF THE REFORM AND ITS GOALS

The debate on how to concretely modernize the university system emerged within the ministry, particularly after the approval of the LOMLOU act. Some officials were concerned about introducing a new ambitious policy at a moment at which Spanish universities were adapting their curricula to the Bologna Process standards, which was a time-consuming process. Accordingly, some public officials proposed that modernization actions should have required small administrative efforts on behalf of universities.

In April 2008, the General Secretaries for Universities was established within the Ministry of Education and Science, which took the responsibility for the regulatory implementation of LOMLOU and fulfilment of the European universities modernization agenda. The General Secretariat was led by a representative of the academic community, the Rector of the University of Barcelona and the vice president of the Spanish Rectors Conference — Professor Rubiralta — and brought forward the ambitions, ideas and expectations of part of the university system to modernize. The modernization agenda of the European Commission (EC) and government commitment through the LOMLOU law provided inspiration and legitimation to develop an ambitious plan. According to some interviewees, the initiative also represented an opportunity for a renewed role of the central government in the steering of higher education and research. With the creation of the General Secretariat for Universities, the idea prevailed to promote more actively the modernization of the Spanish system. A working group within the newly established body was set in place to define an overall strategy for the development of the system. In less than a year, the EU2015 policy framework was crafted and the CEI initiative — CEI represented its main pillar.

The concept and design of the CEI initiative were inspired by the principles included in the ‘modernization of European universities agenda’ (European Commission, 2006), and resembled to some extent previous initiatives developed in Germany (Excellence Initiative 2006–2012), France (PRES 2006, 2008, Operation Campus, 2008) and the United Kingdom (‘A new University Challenge’, 2008). The CEI’s overarching goal was to spur the aggregations between universities and between universities and other institutions around a common project and campus. The campus had to become an environment for excellent scientific, educational and innovative activities in which institutions related to education, research and innovation — the so-called Knowledge Triangle — could meet and collaborate (European Commission, 2005). Accordingly, the CEI was expected to modernize and improve Spanish universities in a number of dimensions (Rubialta, 2010; Ministerio de Educacion, 2011; Delgado, 2012; Rubialta and Delgado 2010):

1. To reduce fragmentation, thus improving the position of Spanish universities in international rankings by promoting a few campuses of global recognition.

2. To open the universities and increase its contribution to the external context by fostering strategic alliances between a variety of partners located in the region. The campus, integrated with the
For the first submission, dated 2000, the purpose of initial preparation was to ensure a high level of excellence. The proposed approach was to involve experts from various fields and the proposal was reviewed by national and international colleagues. This approach was adopted to ensure that the proposal met the required standards for excellence. The proposal was submitted in 2000 and was supported by the national and international community.

In 2002, the proposal was refined and submitted again for consideration. Despite some initial scepticism, due to the non-formal nature, the proposal was received positively.

Considering the proposals, the importance of the proposal was realised.

In 2003, the proposal was submitted to the University of Excellence and was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2004, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2005, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2006, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2007, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2008, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2009, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2010, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2011, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2012, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2013, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2014, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2015, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2016, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2017, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2018, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2019, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2020, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.

In 2021, the proposal was approved by the Council of Ministers. The proposal was also presented to the Spanish Congress and the European Parliament. In 2022, the proposal was finalised and submitted for consideration.
After this first scrutiny, full proposals were developed by the leading university, with the support of associate members. This phase was particularly delicate for internal relationships within the universities. In fact, the governance of Spanish universities has been traditionally consensual, egalitarian and strategically weak. The leadership had little formal powers and legitimation to make strategic decisions, such as which areas of the university had to become an institutional priority. The CEI initiative, however, was asking universities to signal which parts were their flagships, and in which areas they wanted to invest. Understandably, in many cases, this raised internal debate and struggles. Still, the CEI was a sufficient legitimization for leaderships to identify such priority areas.

**Selection**

Shortlisted projects were selected by an International Assessment Committee of nine experts (one-third renewed each year). The proposals were submitted via a website. Candidates included the details of the proposed cluster, its final objectives and the strategy by which they were to be achieved. They had to specify the institutions and structures involved and the governance structure. All CEI candidatures were also presented at a public event held the day before the official assessment. Each presentation consisted of a video and a 10-min talk, an explanatory hand-out and promotional materials.

The official call set some generic criteria for the selection of the proposal, leaving quite some discretion to the International Assessment Committee (State of Spain, 2009). The original idea of the policy designers was to identify only a few campuses of international excellence. However, during the selection phase, it became clear that a too selective approach would have created discontent among universities and lead to regions excluded – as the number of submissions was much higher than expected – with a waste of potentially valuable initiatives. Hence, it was decided that different categories of projects were to be awarded. Finally, three categories of projects where identified: (1) CEIs – for example, proposals most closely comparable to the best projects produced in other countries; (2) International Campus of Excellence, regional level (CEIRs) – Regional Campus of Excellence projects – namely, proposals viewed by the evaluators as not able to compete for excellence at a global scale, while regarded strong enough to act as ‘regional’ (in the European sense) drivers of knowledge; (3) promising, for example, proposals that earned a positive appraisal but did not yet qualify as CEI or CEIR. This decision was endorsed by the ministry following the recommendations from the committee.

Despite this broader approach, however, the reaction from the universities and regions excluded from the selection was strong. In turn, throughout the three calls, the CEI developed into a much more comprehensive initiative than initially envisaged. The 32 awarded projects finally included almost all universities and research centres, as well as 74% of the companies participating in the Spanish exchange index Indice Bursatil Espanol, e.g. Spanish Exchange Index (1BEXH156), plus a large number of business associations, hospitals and public institutions (Casani et al., 2014). Aggregations implied systemic collaboration between selected centres, institutes and facilities from two or more universities within the same region or across different regions, between universities and national or regional research bodies as well as public/private aggregations. Aggregations between selected centres, institutes and facilities from two or more universities were the majority (Rubiralta, 2010).

**Implementation, Evaluation and Monitoring**

Approved CEIs and CEIRs had to implement and sustain the plan of action throughout the entire period. Campus’ participants were fully autonomous in managing the implementation of the proposal and the related funds, although under the financial supervision of the regions. Each year a progress report had to be produced and assessed by an International Evaluation Committee, composed by two members of the general secretary of the universities, one of them acting as technical secretary and only interlocutor with the commission, the general director for the university policy and six foreign experts. The assessment was only based on the official reports and the content of the websites, with no visits in situ. Each campus was evaluated by two foreign experts, first with an independent evaluation, and finally reaching a consensual judgment with the support of the technical secretary of the committee. Key criteria for evaluation were: (1) the existence of strategic aggregations between universities and knowledge-related agents; (2) internationalization level and initiatives to increase the international visibility and recognition of the CEI; (3) specialization, based on own strengths; (4) interaction with the business and territorial environment, contributing to their socio-economic development. The main task of the evaluation was to judge the level of improvement and assess whether the campus
The Context of Implementation and the Impact

The Inter-American Institute of a 2015. In official cables...
higher education system. Roughly in the same years when the initiative was implemented, the financial and then economic global crisis impacted Spain in a particularly strong way. As a consequence, funds available were much less than initially expected, they occurred mostly via loans, and the interest rate was gradually increased. In particular, when Spain subscribed the Stability Pact due to the economic and financial crisis, the interest rate on the loans was increased from 0 to 1.5% in 2010, and to 5.67% in 2011. At that point, regions were not allowed to subscribe to new agreements, so that no funds were allocated for the 2011 call. In turn, financial constraints affected the policy implementation and its overall impact (Casani et al., 2014). Moreover, in the same period when the CEI initiative was designed and launched, Spanish universities were involved in the adoption of the Bologna Process guidelines for the organization of curricula. This process required much effort from their side and was accompanied by students’ protests. As a matter of fact, parts of the resources of CEI were then allocated for the implementation of the Bologna Process (under the umbrella of the EHEA initiative). The coexistence with this challenging process arguably limited the time and effort that universities and their leadership could devote to the CEI initiative, which was by itself a very ambitious and time-consuming task.

With these strong constraints in the background, the achievements and impact of the reform can be examined in a number of dimensions.

Visibility and participation. Interviewees agree that the most valuable result of the CEI was to increase the visibility of the universities in the society, by encouraging them to communicate with actors at the national and local levels, as universities leaders were in fact spurred to look for local political and economic partners to increase chances of success in the application. The initiative has emphasized universities’ third mission and placed them for the first time at the centre of the regional debate on social and economic development. While in some cases, universities relied on pre-existing linkages, in other cases, new contacts have been established with some durable gains, such as more contract funds, internships and public-private partnerships. The initiative was able to attract much attention from the universities, which all participated to the competitive bid as leading or associate partners.

Governance. The university leaderships were able, under the external pressure of the initiative, to reflect strategically and identify the institutional flagships. Internal reorganizations of departments and faculties have occurred in some universities, thanks to the CEI initiative. On the other side, the governance of universities has not been affected by the CEI initiative (Casani et al., 2014). The CEIs’ governance relies on their own bodies or on the universities governance structure. Their budget was limited to the loans and grants, whereas crucial decisions on recruitment and management of general funds remained under the authority of the universities. In turn, CEIs are more like appendices of universities, managed ‘like any other university project’ – although an important one (Ministerio de Educacion, 2015) – rather than a ‘Trojan horse’ for virtuous practices within the university. Finally, the campus existed physically only in some projects, whereas initiatives involving universities located in different cities did not have and did not create a new common campus, but rather added the CEI label to their existing locations and facilities.

Relationships. Several interviewees recognize that as a consequence of the policy, the universities are now interacting more between each other and with external partners, such as ministries, regional authorities and private organizations. On the other hand, not all initiatives implied aggregations between different universities, as several were led by one university alone.

Profiling. Differentiation and specialization only occurred to a limited extent, as the resources available for the campus were not large, and parts of the universities that were not initially involved in the proposals, were often involved during the implementation.

International visibility and vertical differentiation. Indeed the position of top Spanish universities in international rankings, their scientific output (+17% on average) and level of internationalization, as regards scientific collaborations (+12%), foreign students and academic staff, have improved considerably in recent years (Table 1). The international orientation has also improved as regards the teaching offer, with more bilingual courses (Spanish and English). However, the improvements regarded almost all Spanish universities, and not only top institutions or those more directly involved in the CEI initiative, with a mean growth of +22% in scientific output, and +12% in international collaboration between 2009 and 2014. Some interviewees among the policy proponents recognized that – given the salience of rankings in the policy discourse and for universities competition for status – the identification and promotion of an elite group of institutions was to a large extent instrumental to attract government’s and universities’ interest, rather than a key priority. Moreover, during the implementation phase, this goal emerged as the most problematic politically because of the opposition of universities (and related
The problem is that the introduction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) requires a coherent and integrated approach to education and training across all levels and disciplines. This is essential to ensure that students can move seamlessly between different institutions and countries. The EHEA aims to harmonize higher education across Europe, allowing students to pursue their studies in another country and have their credits and qualifications recognized.

However, the implementation of the EHEA has been slow and patchy. While some countries have made significant progress, others have lagged behind. This has led to a situation where students may face difficulties in transferring their credits and qualifications, or may struggle to find suitable courses in their chosen field of study.

There are several reasons for this. First, there is a lack of coordination between national education systems. Each country has its own educational framework, which can make it difficult to align with the EHEA's standards. Second, there is a need for more standardized testing and evaluation methods to ensure that students are meeting the required levels of competence.

Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities. The EHEA provides a platform for collaboration and innovation, allowing institutions to share best practices and resources. It also opens up new possibilities for research and development, as well as for the sharing of knowledge and expertise.

Overall, the EHEA represents a significant step forward in the modernization of European higher education. While there are still challenges to overcome, the prospects for progress are promising. With continued commitment and cooperation, the EHEA can be a catalyst for change and a force for advancement in the field of education.
THE INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGN OF EXCELLENCE IN SPAIN

The international campaign of excellence in Spain was a significant change in the Spanish higher education system, enhancing excellence and relevance on a global scale. The central government allowed the regions to run the reform, substantially affected the political and administrative distribution of the Spanish HE system in terms of specific and traditional distribution goals during the implementation phase. Most notably, the vertical differentiation dimension of the reform (spawning an elite) was gradually facilitated because of the pressure of universities — and regions — whose funding was more dependent on the program.
European Commission. (2005). Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: Enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy. Brussels: EUROLEX.


Ministerio de Educacion (2009), Orden del Ministro de Educacion por la que se nombra a los miembros de la Comision Internacional del Programa Campus de Excelencia Internacional de la convocatoria de 2009-30 Oct 2009

Ministerio de Educacion (2011) Balance de 3 años del Programa Campus de Excelencia Internacional


OECD (2013) OECD dataset on education.


State of Spain (2009) BOLETÍN OFICIAL DEL ESTADO Núm. 177, Jueves 23 de julio de 2009 Sec. III. Pág. 63101

**External Links**


CEI and CEIR selected – by year


(Example – year 2012)

**Marco Seeher** is Postdoctoral Researcher at the CHEGG, Department of Sociology, Ghent University, Belgium. He holds a Master’s degree in Business Economics from the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia, Italy (2003), and an interdisciplinary PhD from the University of Chieti-Pescara, Italy (2009). In 2010, he became postdoc researcher at the Center on Organizational Research at the University of Lugano, Switzerland. In 2013, he became postdoc at Ghent University. His research interests are higher education and research management, organisation and policies.