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AN INTERPRETATIVE APPROACH**

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## Revisiting resistance to change at the university: An interpretative approach

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### ABSTRACT

Generally perceived as a negative phenomenon to overcome, resistance to change (RTC) has been discussed widely in the organization literature. However, opting for a manichean view of RTC seems to be simplistic. In this paper we focus on exploring professors' reactions to change induced by the Bologna reform at the university. Based on 38 in-depth interviews and using Pettigrew's framework (context – content – process), we observe that reactions to change are mostly ambivalent, containing both positive and negative representations. This leads us to introduce the concept of *reluctance* to change as a result of the ambivalent reactions. Going further in our exploration, we emphasize some main elements that explain the negative representations: a lack of shared vision, an uncertain political context and a perceived lack of resources. We also emphasize incompatibilities that nurture ambivalence: a university culture characterized by stability, slowness, academic freedom, incremental and consensus-based change, is not adapted to the Bologna reform, which occurs with an overall sense of urgency, a rapid rhythm of adaptation, an imposed and complex process. This paper shows that university is not a simple and homogenous organization since it is composed of different subcultures. Based on these results, we suggest university managers develop a common sense-making and take *reluctance* to change into account as an indicator of future potential brakes in the Bologna process.

### INTRODUCTION

Private and public organisations are facing a future made of continuous change, due to factors such as globalisation or information technology. Facing a changing environment, public organisations such as universities are currently inspired by the model of private companies. Studying organisational change represents a main problem for theorists as well as for managers. Research dealing with several theories of change and referring to some empirical studies (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995; Barnett & Carroll, 1995) points out the need for additional studies in this field (Pettigrew et al., 2001).

In the near future, the European higher education landscape will undergo major changes caused by the implementation of the so-called Bologna process. Understanding how to manage major organisational changes becomes to be a key survival condition for European universities. Indeed, several studies on change in private companies emphasize that risks of failure in implementing major changes are high, particularly for top-down initiated ones. According to Maurer (1996), re-engineering efforts would not have more than 33% of chances to succeed, mergers and acquisitions only 29%, quality improvement programs would only reach their objectives in half the cases, and the implementation of new software would not succeed in more than 20% of cases.

This paper attempts to better understand how favourable or unfavourable a context can be for the implementation of major organisational changes such as the Bologna project

launched within European universities. We focus our attention on professors' reactions to change as a critical factor to avoid classical failures in the implementation of change.

The purpose of this study is to explore change interpretations, on the basis of in-depth interviews of 38 professors, in order to understand behaviours of resistance to or support for change at the university.

Kanter, Stein and Jick (1992) were interested in planned organisational change in large organizations. They identified three categories of significant actors in times of change design and implementation within the organizations. They define the "change strategists" who conceive change, the "change organizers" who implement it and the "change recipients" who are in the field and strongly affected by the change and its implementation. They explicitly present the category of recipients as being the main source of resistance to change.

*" Change recipients represent the largest group of people that must adopt and adapt to, change... Recipients appear, in the organisational change literature as primarily sources of resistances " (Kanter and al., 1992: 379-380)*

Even if this is a simplification of the organisational reality, building such categories improves our understanding of the roles played by organisational actors in a context of change. In the framework of this research, we focus exclusively on "change recipients". In particular, our study focuses on the interpretations of change by the recipients – professors – because they are often seen as primarily sources of resistances (Coch et French, 1969; Kotter and Schlesinger, 1979; Kanter et al., 1992).

## **RESISTANCE TO CHANGE : THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

Organisational change and resistances to change have received a lot of attention in the literature (Isabella, 1990; Maurer, 1996; Kanter et al., 1992; Strebel, 1996; Buchanan and Badham, 1999).

Organisational change has been studied at three different levels: a population of organisations, a single organisation and the individuals within an organisation (Macri et al., 2002). This research can be classified at the micro-organisational level. It addresses individual interpretations and willingness to resist or to support change. Several studies argue that many change projects fail because of resistance to change. Even if the notion of resistance seems known and familiar, it remains complex as it covers psychological, sociological, political, economic or cultural realities, among others. Consequently one should be careful when approaching resistance as a unique and global concept. In managerial literature, interests in the concept of resistance to change date back to the fifties (Coch and French, 1948). Coch and French explain resistance to change with emotional factors, which generate feelings of aggression and frustration by employees, and imply undesirable behaviours. According to Zaltman & Duncan (1977), resistance is defined as "any conduct that serves to maintain the statu quo in the face of pressure to alter the statu quo." In most cases, maintaining the statu quo in the organisation as much as possible seems to be the goal.

On the contrary, Dent and Goldberg (1999) argue that individuals do not really resist to change. Rather they resist to the loss of status, salary or comfort. They claim that "it is time that we dispense with the phrase resistance to change and find a more useful and appropriate model for describing what the phrase has come to mean – employees are not wholeheartedly embracing a change that management wants to implement."

In this stream, Piderit's work (2000) suggests that resistance to change is a broader and multidimensional concept. Piderit also states that "a review of past empirical research reveals three different emphases in conceptualisations of resistance: as a cognitive state, as an

emotional state, and as a behaviour.” She suggests that even if these different dimensions overlap, they have complementary contributions. Piderit invites researchers to find a way to integrate these perspectives in order to understand how individuals react to imposed organisational changes. Each part of the concept of resistance to change – behaviour, emotion, belief – highlights the whole and helps to understand the reactions to change given by those who are affected by it.

## **AN INTERPRETATIVE BACKGROUND TO ANALYSE ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE**

The interpretative paradigm is grounded in a conception of organisational reality as a social construct (Berger, Luckmann, 1966). Reality is not objective but subjective. It is “a socially constructed system of shared meanings” (Burrell et Morgan, 1979). The organisational reality is progressively constructed through social interactions by individuals adjusting progressively their ideas and perceptions.

Several authors have adopted this model to address the issue of strategic change (Chaffee, 1985; Gioia&Chittipedi, 1991; Isabella,1990). To a certain extent, Pettigrew (1977) has also contributed to this model, putting emphasis on symbols and sense making at the very central place in the strategic change process. Several authors have stressed the leader's role in building a shared interpretation of the reality. Leaders are able to manage symbols and to influence sense making (Pfeffer, 1981; Daft & Weick, 1984). One of the main challenges in managing major organisational changes is to enable the newly created representations to be collectively shared by organisational members. Because of the diversity of perspectives, reaching a consensus is the main challenge to perform major changes within highly complex organisations (Hafsi & Demers, 1989).

The interpretative stream concentrates on organisational actors' points of view. It takes into account the diversity of interpretations by different actors pursuing their own objectives and interests. A few studies address the point of view of managers in piloting change. Managers are not equally open to change and some of them prefer the *status quo* (Hambrick, Geletkanycz, Fredrickson, 1993). In crisis situations, top managers have sometimes a great difficulty to formulate and implement change even if the organisation is collapsing (Starbuck, Greve, Hedberg, 1978). Personal traits of organisational actors, the contexts in which they evolve and their interpretations of these contexts would play a central role in the way they deal with organisational change (Lant, Miliken, Bartra, 1992). The theory of "enactment" (Weick, 1969) proposes a fruitful point of view to address the subjective origins of organisational transformations. Environment is not "objective" but it is a social construct deriving from interacting organisational members, and depending on their interpretations (Koenig, 1996). Managers construct, reorganise or erase some "objective" aspects of their environment. They play the role of "sense-givers" or "sense-producers", re-affirming in most cases pre-existing schemes of reference or introducing new schemes during organisational changes (Pichault, 1993). Several authors have highlighted the importance of symbols (actions, events, metaphors, images etc.) in major processes of change (Gioia *et alii*, 1994).

## **INTERPRETATIONS AND RESISTANCE TO CHANGE**

Change starts with the perception of its need and so a negative initial perception can be the first barrier to change (Kotter, 1995; Beer and Eisenstat, 1990). The perceptions of individuals play a fundamental role in the process of change and thus in the creation of resistance (Eby et al., 2000; Macri et al., 2002). Armenakis et al. (1993) explain that perception is “the cognitive precursor to the behaviors of either resistance to, or support for, a change effort”. Employees' perceptions can facilitate or undermine the effectiveness of a change intervention (Armenakis et al., 1993). If the results of the change process are linked to the individuals' perceptions, then the role of managers to communicate and to provide motivation becomes important (Schein, 1996). Only a few studies have observed how an

organisation tackles change and how change is perceived by organizational actors (Isabella, 1990; Buchanan and Badham, 1999).

The aim of this paper is to describe, using a qualitative research, change recipients' perceptions to better understand their behaviours of resistance to, or support for organisational change.

## **FROM REPRESENTATION TO BEHAVIOURAL ACTION**

An important assumption in the interpretative stream of research is that organizational members actively create and enact the reality they inhabit (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Weick, 1979), upon which they predicate their future actions (Silverman, 1970).

The literature on organisational change has suggested (Van de Ven, 1980; Bartunek, 1984, Sutton, 1987, Isabella, 1990) that an important amount of cognition and interpretation is linked to the process of change. Some authors have suggested that understanding the cognitive basis for responding to change would influence the effectiveness of organisation responses (Gioia, 1986; Isabella, 1990). Understanding the cognitive basis of the response to change requires understanding interpretation.

Studying resistance to change from the recipients' points of view seems relevant because individuals' perceptions can help understand behaviours that take part to the change implementation process.

The individuals' perceptions take part in organisational dynamics and play an important role in readiness or resistance to change set up. Without being defender of a direct causality between representation and action, we support the idea that there is a strong relation between these two components. Although few research in the change literature build on this perspective, this idea seems essential for managing difficulties to implement major organisational change. (Isabella, 1990, Buchanan and Badham, 1999; Piderit, 2001).

Our research relies on the assumption, as largely developed in the literature, that there is a strong relation between interpretation and action. Taking into account actors' perceptions is thus essential to understand the phenomenon of resistance to change. Our research stresses coherence between positively connoted representations of change and a propensity to behave in favour of change. In the same way, our study supposes that negative representations induce a propensity to behave against change.

## **RESEARCH FIELD : THE UNIVERSITÉ CATHOLIQUE DE LOUVAIN**

Founded in 1425, the Université catholique de Louvain (UCL) is one of the oldest universities in the world. In 1970, the old university split in two separated universities, one Flemish which remained in Leuven, one French-speaking which has been built in a new city, named Louvain-la-Neuve, in Wallonia (French-speaking region of Belgium). With its historical background, UCL forms an interesting research area to better understand how a university does integrate change and how its members perceive change.

The Université catholique de Louvain is a complete university, with nine faculties. Each faculty is divided into departments, which include several teaching and research units. The Rector and two Vice-rectors play a leading role in implementing this major change, known as the Bologna reform. UCL has 20.000 students from 120 countries, a staff of 5.000 composed of teachers, researchers and administrative staff and 200 research units.

More particularly, our study focuses on the beginning period of the implementation of the Bologna reform. This major change began on June 19<sup>th</sup> 1999, by the common Declaration of

29 European Education ministers. This Declaration is part of a large European movement towards harmonisation, mostly in the way of a “Europe of Knowledge”. The objectives contained in this Declaration are defined in the short run, before 2010. These can be summarized in six main points:

- 1) Adoption of a comparable diploma system;
- 2) Adoption of a double cursus system (bachelor and master);
- 3) Implementation of a credit system – ECTS (European Credit Transfer System);
- 4) Promotion of mobility, for students as well as for teachers;
- 5) European cooperation in terms of quality assessment;
- 6) Promotion of European dimension.

UCL has already completed the first steps to get ready for this reform: a “Bologna group” has been created within the Academic Council and within the CEFO (Teaching and Training Council). This reform will greatly impact the core activities of the university which are teaching, research and services to society.

In order to evaluate professors’ reactions to this imminent change, we chose this starting period of the reform, to improve our understanding of favourable and unfavourable factors to initiate its implementation.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The analysis method was inspired by the grounded theory approach formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and by techniques for analysing qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1991). The grounded theory approach requires that data and theory are constantly compared and contrasted throughout the data collection and analysis process. Building on the interpretative paradigm, we designed our study to identify the interpretations that change recipients (professor) construct in order to anticipate their behaviour to resist to or support for change.

Our research was based on an in-depth case study (Yin, 1989), mainly founded on semi-structured interviews of an hour on average. The specific purpose of the interviews was to learn about professors' concerns and reactions linked with negative or positive perceptions of change. The goal of the data collection was to understand how professors saw the Bologna process. We selected 38 UCL professors<sup>1</sup> to participate in the study. In order to describe the collective interpretation of the Bologna process at the university, we selected professors from different faculties. Our research strategy followed directly Schein’s (1985) notion that events are critical when participants themselves perceive them as such. These events are key events in the eyes of organisational members.

We chose a qualitative approach for several reasons. First of all, the study of resistance to change needs a direct contact with implied actors in order to better grasp underground mechanisms. Secondly, the sensitivity of the issue made us doubt the efficiency of a quantitative approach based on questionnaires. Qualitative research based on an in-depth case study approach is recommended when focus is on contemporary events in their context in real time, where limits between studied phenomenon and context are not obvious (Yin 1989: 18).

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<sup>1</sup> These interviews were conducted between September and October 2003 by students (4<sup>th</sup> year, business engineering degree) in the framework of a course concerning the *Methods of qualitative data analysis*. The interviews were conducted on the basis of a similar interview guide, and focused on the implementation of the Bologna process at the university. Each interview was conducted by two students, was taped and completely transcribed.

## DATA CODING

Following Miles and Huberman (1991, p.98), a coding project was developed. It consisted in establishing a list of codes that were attributed to the segments of interviews. The data coding consisted of the classification of excerpts in three *a priori* categories, corresponding to the three main variables introduced by Pettigrew (1985) to analyse major organisational changes : the “content”, “context” and “process” variables. Pettigrew's seminal theoretical framework (1985, 1987, 1990) is widely considered as a key reference in the study of organizational change within large organizations. In this formulation, the management of strategic change takes into account not only the content of a chosen change but also the management of the process of change, and the context in which it occurs (Pettigrew, 1987). Broadly speaking, the label *content* is concerned with the 'what' of change, much of the 'how' of change being derived from an analysis of inner and outer *context*, and from an analysis of *process*.

We opted for an inferential coding method that enabled to identify patterns and trends that are potentially valid to fit with one of the three Pettigrew's generic categories. About 619 segments were extracted from the 38 interviews.

## DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis was realised by comparing the frequencies of the presence or absence of certain codes. The unit analysis is the sentence (sometimes extracts) or one complete transcript paragraph. This method enables to test the behavioural validity of interviewed actors (Denzin, 1978). The researcher observes whether a social phenomenon appears in the behavioural repertoire of an actor and, if it is the case, according to which frequency, in which situations and when. The higher the frequency observed, for different periods and various situations, the higher the behavioural validity (Denzin, 1978). Empirical results given by collected data were based on a dichotomy between positive and negative representations carried by professors about change.

Thirty eight professors were randomly chosen within different UCL faculties and were interviewed during one hour on average. The following table allows evaluating the average number of extracts by professor. These extracts were selected in accordance to their positive or negative significance in regard to the implementation of the Bologna reform within the university.

Faculties	Number of interviews	Average number of negative extracts by professor	Average number of positive extracts by professor
Agronomy	2	15	17
Law	4	14	3
Medicine	2	8	10
Philosophy and languages	2	9	6
Psychology	4	9	5
Sciences	2	20	5
Applied sciences	7	10	5
Economic, social and political sciences	14	11	3
Theology	1	5	7
<b>AVERAGE</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>7</b>

Table1: Average number of positive and negative extracts for the 38 interviews, by faculty.

A first quick analysis suggests that two thirds of interviewed professors could be considered as resistant to change (because negative perceptions are higher than positive ones). However, we wanted to better understand the sources of resistance to change expressed by interviewed professors. In order to analyse the reactions of change at the micro-level, we used the previously defined categories: content, process and contexts (inner and outer). We split the "context" category in two subcategories (see: annex 1).

## MAIN RESULTS AND COMMENTS

Results from the analysis are shown in the following table. They are expressed as *apparition frequencies*. They allow us to put emphasis on the main trends of our research.

Frequencies	Nb of extracts	Extracts coded positively	Extracts coded negatively	Report (+)/(-)	% positive extracts	% negative extracts
Content	228	93	135	0,69	41%	59%
Inner Context	48	6	42	0,14	13%	88%
Outer Context	142	56	86	0,65	39%	61%
Process	201	35	166	0,21	17%	83%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>619</b>	<b>190</b>	<b>429</b>	<b>0,44</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>69%</b>

Table 2: Apparition frequencies of positive and negative extracts for each category.

As largely argued, we stress coherence between negatively connoted perceptions of change and a propensity to behave against change. In the same way, our study supposes that positive perceptions induce a propensity to change.

As shown here, 69% of the extracts are related to negative representations of the implemented change in the university. It is also interesting to observe that the highest negatively connoted frequencies are in the "Inner Context" (88%) and "Process" (83%) categories.

Moreover, frequencies about negative representation of the process are the highest (166 / 619). This result emphasizes how important is the way of implementing a major organisational change. The way of implementing change appears to be as important as the content of change. These results are appealing for people in charge of the change process at the studied university.

The key result of our study does not appear clearly in the above table. Indeed, several interviewed professors have both positive and negative representations about the Bologna reform. This observation clearly puts the well-known classifications of people involved in change – supporters versus opponents – into question, as they usually are presented in guiding manuals for organisational changes. In fact, literature in change management commonly presents reactions to change as a dichotomy, by detecting supporters and opponents. Classically, supporters are considered as change agents whereas opponents to change are presented as to be overcome. Our results question this binary categorisation and invites to a finer analysis of reactions to change by recipients.

The following table shows the ambivalence of interviewed professors with regard to the Bologna reform. We considered a professor as ambivalent when he had at least one positive and one negative coded extracts in a specific category.

Frequency	Nb ambivalent professors	% sample
Content	31	81,6%
Inner Context	4	10,5%
Outer Context	19	50,0%
Process	22	57,9%
Average	19	50,0%

Table 3: Number of ambivalent recipients per category

On the one hand, the inner context is perceived as globally unfavourable<sup>2</sup> to the reform (university culture, insufficient resources for the implementation, and faculties' cultures in favour of stability) and has a weak percentage of ambivalent reactions (10% of our sample). On the other hand, 81,6% of interviewed professors have both positive and negative reactions on the content of the reform. Concerning the process, the percentage equals 58%. The ambivalent reactions toward change are the highest in the content and process categories. We now interpret these ambivalent reactions to change in the light of each category.

## INTERPRETATION OF EMPIRICAL RESULTS

Going through each of these categories, we emphasize some main reasons why ambivalent reactions to change – that we call *reluctance to change* instead of *resistance to change* – appear in the analysis of coded extracts. Reluctance to change is based on contradictions between elements from the intrinsic content of the reform, the conditions to apply it (contexts) and the way of implementing this change (process).

### **Content**

The coded interviews highlighted that 59% of extracts in the content category have negative connotations. When trying to understand this percentage, we found **a lack of shared vision by professors** (change recipients) concerning the future of the Bologna reform in the studied university.

Several studies in change management have insisted on the importance of a shared vision in any organisational change proposal (Pettigrew, 1985 ; Kotter, 1995; Kanter et al., 1992) in order to make change implementation processes succeed. Successful change depends on the shared values and objectives, for the managers and the involved people. Our results suggest explaining this lack of shared vision by a perceived lack of clarity in the content of the Bologna reform, as illustrated by the following quotes:

*"Initial motivations [to implement this reform] are not clear to me, and if they are not for me, they should not be for students or others." P-34*

*"Of course it is not an easy task but it is not so much the lack of clear deadlines than the **lack of clear guidelines** that was problematic" P-36*

*"Politics have not been clear enough at the European level, I think, in announcing precisely that priority is to offer an accessible European higher education system for all." P-4*

*"We are so much in the fog concerning some aspects that people say it is useless to work on it as long as **we do not know where we go**. It is realism." P-2*

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<sup>2</sup> See Table 2

A lack of shared vision puts emphasis on the importance to create a collective sensemaking in leading a major change. Several studies have insisted on the role of sense-maker for change managers in any change context (Weick, 1995 ; Gioia and Chitipeddi, 1991; Isabella, 1990).

The lack of clarity in the content of the Bologna reform is more a source of ambivalence than of resistance. Indeed, 31 out of 38 professors have ambivalent reactions with regard to the content of the reform: they have both negative and positive representations. The most negative reactions about the content of the reform are related to the expected results.

*"Bologna is going to change a lot of things for students because there is a real increase in possible choices. Students will have to choose. They will have to be much more responsible of their education... **So, it is interesting**, it is fine in the principles, it is fun....On the other hand, there is also, this makes people afraid, I think some students will ask "What am I going to choose ?"... **So it is going to be difficult for students** I think. University will have to accompany students." P-7*

*"**I am totally in favour of this reform** because I am a convinced European on all aspects. Roughly, I am absolutely favourable to this reform for reasons of principles, because I am European and for practical reasons because I think it is an opportunity for UCL Belgian students ... "If politics say "It [the new program] does not fit with any job, what are professional possibilities, it is not profitable for education, ...", then you can not organize it. **This will really be the end of university ideal for the sake of a professional view which I am against**, because I am a supporter of the university ideal." P-23*

*"Giving students the opportunity to gain more autonomy. This is **an extraordinary pedagogical project** ...Apparently, students from commissions do not complain. **I do not know whether they are really conscious about what is going on...**" P-38*

In order to describe ambivalent reactions on the content, the concept of "ambiguity" has emerged from our data analysis. March (1994) notes that ambiguity refers to a lack of clarity or consistency in reality, causality or intentionality. According to Levine (1985), ambiguity means literally that sentences admit more than one interpretation. Some scholars have argued that ambiguity is more about unclear meaning and "equivocality" (equivocality points explicitly to the presence of two or more interpretations as trigger to sensemaking) is more about the confusion created by two or more meanings, as equivoque (Weick, 1995 : 92).

In line with Martin (1992), we argue that ambiguity is perceived by professors because of a lack of clarity and paradoxes that make multiple, rather than single, plausible explanations. By lack of clarity Martin (1992) means something that seems obscure or indistinct and by paradox, she means an argument that apparently derives contradictory conclusions by valid deduction from acceptable premises. In our case study, the Bologna reform is judged to be ambiguous by a large part of professors since it is unclear, highly complex, or paradoxical.

We can notice that professors' perceptions of the Bologna reform are connected with ambiguous purposes. The goal of the Bologna reform cannot be clearly specified and implies ambiguous expected outcomes.

*"There are really **contradictory objectives** between the **European programs harmonisation** and the opportunity it gives to revisit the financing system of university teaching. And this is also the occasion to **cancel several programs**, which is rather worrying, I would say." P-8*

*"**Contrarily to what is wanted**, we will maybe implicitly **strengthen elitism.**" P-1*

*"Implications for students clearly are ... the result is an **increase in the options** since with the 3-5-8 system, the option to go and make one or two cycles abroad is greatly made easier. It is obvious. As ever when new options are created, **new inequalities** appear. Creating new options obviously strengthen social inequalities at the same time, or inequalities in cursus that may be of different kinds, linguistic, financial, personal in terms of socialisation inequalities, psychological ability to move, etc. It is obvious that new options will mean unavoidably a new in-equalitarian situation."*  
P-14

We also retain the concept of "uncertainty" as an explaining factor of ambivalence. According to Weick (1995), ambiguity is different from uncertainty. It comes from imprecision in estimates of future consequences conditional to present actions (March, 1994).

We argue that the concepts of ambiguity and uncertainty are complementary to understand the lack of shared vision as it has been emphasized through most of our interviews. These concepts help to improve our understanding of ambivalent reactions to change, that is *reluctance to change*. People that are reluctant are not resistant *per se*: they may be waiting because there are ambiguities and/or uncertainties.

The concepts of ambiguity and uncertainty are not to be managed in the same way. The problem of ambiguity is not that the Bologna reform content is imperfectly understood and that more information will remedy that. More information may not resolve misunderstandings (Weick, 1995). Ambiguity calls for shared social construction and collective reinvention of change. In opposition, the problem of uncertainty is that ignorance is created by insufficient **reliable information** and calls for more careful information scanning and discovery.

*"Sincerely, more communication, I do not believe we are in an under-information problem. If one wants, one can be informed and things change all the time and every day, but it requires a daily involvement."* P-1

There is a double challenge. On the one hand, a vision has to be defined with enough **reliable** information to avoid content uncertainty of the reform. On the other hand, this vision has to be shared in order to create a common sensemaking. Clarify a change vision allows to limit the uncertainty linked to the lack of information and to give a framework for the change recipients (professors). Share the change vision allows to master the "ambiguity" related to multiple possible interpretations by change recipients.

Our results point out that professors ask to have a clear vision about the future of the university. It is consistent with the fact that change managers at the university must spend more time in creating a collective sensemaking through change recipients, by reducing "confusion" and multiple interpretations.

Moreover, our study puts emphasis on a major ambiguity in the intrinsic content of the Bologna reform, reflected in the ambiguity of its announced objectives. European countries are harmonising their higher education systems regarding the degree structure, credit systems and quality requirements. It is important to notice that the relationship between European convergence and globalisation in higher education is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Bologna reform wants to strengthen the competitiveness of European higher education in the global competitive market. On the other hand, European countries want to preserve a specific approach in terms of cultural diversity, access and equity, in opposition to a liberalised higher education global market. The relationship between the Bologna reform (change content) and the globalisation phenomenon (change outer context) may create a paradox, with two divergent interpretations from its advocates and opponents. The supporters argue that Bologna is a first but important step towards the integration of the European higher education systems into a globalised market. The opponents interpretate the

Bologna reform as a risk of privatisation and commercialisation and defend higher education as a public good protecting cultural diversity, democratic access and quality standards. This underlying debate, although existing and often referred to, has not been predominant in interviews as a major factor against the Bologna reform. More often, references to negative expected results are made as a warning against a liberalised higher education.

*"I think the big question is: where does Europe go ? What does it want ? What is the underlying European project in this reform ? How are studies placed in this European framework ? **Do we think of students' education in a more and more competitive society, founded on economic bases, because Europe basis was economic ? Or do we position us in a much more dynamic perspective ? I do not know whether all the stakeholders in this reform ask themselves all these questions, but they still have given no direction.**" P-1*

### **Outer Context**

Coding interviews highlighted that 61% of coded extracts of the outer context category have negative connotations. It seems that the ambivalence about representations of the outer context is "balanced": we see that 50% of professors have ambivalent reactions to change.

To explain this percentage, we mainly found an **uncertain political context** characterized by a lack of a legal framework for the Bologna reform. It seems that many professors feel to be obliged (process) to accept this reform (content) that is not clear, even for those who should give the legal framework. The outer context increases the overall feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity.

*"But I am not sure we really are late, because others have other problems, but I think **we need responsible politics**. So, it is said: "We are going to change everything. You should think about it, we are going to change everything", but we do not know on which basis we can think. And if we think to the best possible reasoning, **we are not even sure that it will be possible.**" P-11*

*"... we have postponed, we have taken the issue much too late and **we have closed ourselves in disputes about competences, on religious or philosophical domains**, rather than to attack the core of the problem, the objective of the Bologna Declaration." P-22*

*"Moreover, **a lack of clarity in directives from the French Community is a big handicap for us**, directives are late and the "décret" organizing education according to Bologna still does not exist (in negotiation phase). We have not yet any legal framework saying what we have to do. The biggest difficulty is the obligation to begin to work and **imagine a reform without any strict framework.**" P-29*

A second element related to the outer context is the **sense of urgency**, which adds pressure to a rapid implementation and is incompatible with the traditional academic culture of stability (inner context). Pressure to change and the culture of stability at the university create a misalignment and make people doubt about the necessity of urgency.

*"If all European universities are not ready, **why should Belgian universities begin now ? If we are not ready and others not as well, why endanger such an important operation, which has significant consequences in the long term ?**" P-22*

Several studies have put emphasis on the necessity of a "sense of urgency" in order to stimulate change within organisations. External pressure is often quoted as a triggering factor for major change projects because it has a role of change legitimator (Pettigrew, 1987). In our case, the external pressure comes from globalisation, competition, harmonisation... But, to accept a quick rhythm of change imposed by external pressures, adequate conditions for change within the organization are important.

## **Inner Context**

Coding interviews highlighted that 88% of coded extracts of the inner context category have negative connotations. In our study, this variable is mostly related to the importance of organisational culture and climate. It seems that the ambivalent representations of the inner context are much less than for the outer context. Only 10% of professors have ambivalent reactions to the organisational context. The inner context is perceived as unfavourable to the Bologna reform. It is interesting to understand why such a consensus exists.

A first element concerns a **perceived lack of resources** (pedagogical, logistic, administrative, financial...) proper to the university, which is of course related to the feasibility of the reform (content) and its expected process.

*"We will do five years instead of four, but with the same budget, and this is rather difficult to manage." P-12*

*"Ideally, for the reform to be effective, more means are necessary since another type of education, more active pedagogies, more tutoring, more teachers' presence,... are wanted. So, ideally, more means are necessary. Now, we have to do it within a closed envelope, so we have to invent tricks so that it will not cost more, and this is one of the limits." P-23 (-)*

*"Like many reforms, I think the idea is not bad, even probably very good but one should have means to develop this kind of pedagogy." P-28 (-)*

In our study, most of the interviewed professors state that there are not enough resources to implement the reform. Most extracts point out the lack of core resources to succeed.

A second element is the **organisational climate characterized by urgency**. Effects of organisational culture are coupled with the organisational climate. According to Taguri and Litwin (1968 : 27), organisational climate is defined as: "*relatively enduring quality of the internal environment of an organization that (1) is experienced by its members, (2) influences their behavior, and (3) can be described in terms of the values of a particular set of characteristics (or attitudes) of the organization*". The organisational climate bases on global perceptions of the organisation by the individuals that compose it. Koys and DeCotiis (1991) define the organisational climate as : "*an experimental-based, multidimensional, and enduring perception phenomenon which is widely shared by the members of a given organizational unit.*" It seems that the urgency climate, alarmist and short term reactive, may generate a mistrust with regard to the change reform. The misalignment between a university culture, not fashioned to major and rapid changes, and the creation of an urgency climate can be observed in our study.

A third element is the **university culture** that is mainly characterized by stability, consensus and academic freedom. Note that this organisational context does not fit very well with an imposed process and, as such constitutes a cultural incompatibility.

*"Local resistances? It is possible ! Because academic freedom is very appreciated at the university. By some more than others. It should not be given many directives." P-18*

Jaques' work (1972) introduces organisational culture as a usual way of thinking and acting in any company, more or less shared by its members, and that should be learned and accepted, at least partially, by new members. Morin (1991) defines organisational culture as a set of shared evidence, built along the company story and answering encountered problems. The idea of answering organisational problems is an echo to Schein's work (1985) which enriches the definition by giving a diachronic dimension, by presenting culture as a collective learning process, adapting to external environment and integrating individuals.

According to Johnson (1992), the organisational culture is represented by a 'paradigm', which is the core set of beliefs and attitudes held by employees.

The paradigm develops throughout the history of the university, and is shared to varying degrees by professors. Effective organisational change is likely to be achieved when it is in line with the organisational paradigm and the social, political and cultural norms of the university.

In our study, organisational culture is a core factor susceptible to influence professors' representations about change. In line with a previous study about change management (Vas & Ingham, 2004), we point to the **lack of cultural compatibility for change**. This cultural aspect seems here to be negatively perceived as promoting the reform implementation.

*"But **university has great difficulties to live change as a fighting organisation** in a hostile environment that must think about its future. Sure, university considers its durability as guaranteed." P-14*

*"**Change is incremental**, we are still at the university. There is **no revolution**." P-17*

*"In terms of current programs reforms, **we do not stop reforming what has just been reformed and it becomes invaluable**. The rhythm of successive reforms is such that we cannot even evaluate previous reforms. So, objectively, by going on to work like this, either in Bologna context or anywhere else, this does not make sense." P-36*

*"We have the feeling that **university had until now its specificity** and they attempt to harmonize with non-university institutions. So, the problem is to keep this specificity as long as you think it can bring something more." P-3*

More specifically, our study showed the importance of different **organisational sub-cultures and individual characteristics** of professors (experience of change, age, and organisational identity). The university is not a homogenous milieu. It is composed of many faculties. Each faculty is relatively autonomous with regard to its teaching and research areas. Some faculties are used to conduct pedagogical reform, others are not. The confidence of professors in the reform varies greatly among faculties.

*"I think the reform is well accepted in our faculty. Bologna should not encompass more than what it really includes. I would say that the department has had a tradition of reforms for the last five years. Bologna is just one of these reforms." P-20*

*"In our faculty, it is a synonym of rationalisation and only based on ideological or economic criteria, and this is not well accepted." P-22*

*"For our faculty, it is true that the situation is specific since law is strongly linked to national matters, and so mobility will probably be less important than in "pure" sciences or economic sciences. So, it should rather change less things for us than for other faculties." P-8*

*"Anyway, before the idea of Bologna, our faculty was already on the road. We were just starting a deep teaching reform. Actually, we had to update courses organisations and remove some outdated stuffs." P-7*

Many scholars in organisational theory admit that organisational culture does not erase the existence of sub-cultures within an organisation (Schein, 1996 ; Hofstede, 1994). Laroche (1991) insists on the presence of sub-cultures within organisations, based on the belonging to a socio-professional category and on the belonging to a specific organisational unit.

Our study highlighted that perceived "sense of urgency" from an environmental diagnosis was not the same among all faculties. It appears that sub-cultures have an impact on the way its members perceived change.

These different sub-cultures among faculties imply different representations of organisational reality and of the environment. It is necessary to share different experiences to construct a shared meaning about the future of the university. For example, the professors issued from the business faculty seemed much more in favour of change, considering the future of the university in a competitive context between business schools. This competition generates a pressure to change. On the contrary, members of the law faculty perceived the European context as less competitive, since law relies mostly on national matters. Our results invite to take into account that the rhythm of change could be very different between each faculty at the university.

Another major characteristic of the university culture is based on the **academic freedom**. Notion of academic freedom is still present within the university, described like "an army of officers". Academic freedom is a powerful notion resulting in the fact that major change cannot be easily attained without support from individual academics. In this context, change seems to be better obtained in an incremental process. Academic culture favours incremental change, non-coercive persuasion and high involvement. So, incremental change seems more appropriate within an university in order to operate changes since this approach better fits the cultural paradigm. Harmonisation effect may represent a threat for academic freedom since it is linked to the content of lectures given by each individual academic.

This led us in deepening our study with the change process, which seemed far from fitting with an incremental implementation.

### **Change process**

Coding interviews highlighted that 83% of coded extracts in the process category have negative connotations. It seemed that ambivalent reactions relating to the "change process" are quoted by approximately 2/3 of interviewed professors (57,9%). A tension arises between university culture (academic freedom and stability) and the imposed change process, and between a too rapid rhythm to guide the implementation process.

The first major factor highlighted by the interviewed professors is about the **imposed implementation process**. In most of our interviews, the process is negatively perceived, as an imposed process, in opposition to the classic university culture. In many quotations, Bologna reform appears as a "monster" which is imposed by European directives, far from universities realities and that professors must undergo without being able to interfere on the process rhythm, to modify or reinvent the reform content.

*"For some people, there is a feeling of frustration arising from the fact that all discussions on the implementation, content, direction of this reform escape from a democratic process ... people do not have the opportunity and time, for many reasons, to take part in the design [of this change], it is managed by a small group." P-5*

*"I think that this is seen as an imposed change process from outside. This is not a free choice." P-32*

*"It is like a transplanting of an outer organ, there is often a reject reaction!" P-3*

*"So, our feeling is first that our minister had her ideas, but she launched a large consultation dynamic in order to pretend that the process was more or less voluntary, and here is the result... We know that she imposes more than she consults." P-1*

In line with Pettigrew (1990), actors' interpretations (perceiving, comprehending, learning and remembering) help shape the process. Change processes are constrained by contexts and shape contexts, in the way of either preserving or altering them (Pettigrew, 1990). Beer

et al. (1990) have highlighted difficulties to make a success of a programmatic top-down change process. They emphasize the importance of a bottom-up approach to involve organisational actors. Moreover, the academic culture (inner context), as **a people-oriented culture**, reinforces the feeling and the need of involvement and commitment to change. It seems more difficult to have commitment from professors in an imposed change process because they have no time to recreate, reinvent and appropriate the reform proposed. The following extract illustrates perfectly this point:

*"I think the problem is that a reform or a change can not be brought by some people if it has to occur. It should contaminate everyone, otherwise it does not work. You cannot be fighting against windmills like Don Quichotte... we need leading people but they should diffuse and the agreement of the majority is necessary." P-32*

A second factor concerns the **rhythm of the implementation**. The speed of implementation is a source of reluctance to change. The pace of change is a strong source of ambivalence in the mind of many interviewed professors. They are in favour of the reform but argue that it is too rapid and sources of conflicts.

*"Anyway I think all universities are surprised by short deadlines. This is part of the reform management which is an extremely good way of change for universities that are used to move extremely slowly. We observe it: **the rhythm of the reform is absolutely unusual in the academic world. As far as I am concerned, I think it is a very good thing but most of my colleagues are very anxious**" P-14*

*"It is true that we are under important pressures in order to **move fast**. We have a lot of short deadlines contrary to the common practices at the university." P-32*

*"My feeling now is that **people run too much**. It is difficult to have another feeling than precipitation. We are in a hurrying moment." P-20*

*"But the reform is in process, from what I can see, **so fast** that we are going to miss it because of deadlines imperatives." P-22*

Implementation process is a critical step between the decision to change and its regular appropriation within the organisation (Klein and Sorra, 1996). One of the key elements about the way change is implemented in the university relies on the rhythm of change. Most negative quotations presented the rhythm of change as too rapid. Again, this perception is shaped by the inner and outer contexts of the studied university (pressure from European regulations, urgency climate, university culture of stability, ...).

These results moderate research on change management that stress the necessity to establish a sense of urgency, which often comes from external pressures (Pettigrew, 1985; Kotter, 1990 ). It is essential to take into account the different organisational temporalities and to integrate them in piloting major organisational changes (Spineux, 1998). Each faculty, even department, lives the Bologna reform change at a different pace, according to its own milestones, its own sub-culture, its own local context.

Given the consensual context of the studied university, it is essential to create a common sensemaking and to establish a compromise between various organisational actors involved in the change program. University culture is rooted in a consensual decision making process. Achieving change at the university depends on the opportunity to quickly build a consensus among professors in charge of implementing change on the field. It is the reason why the lack of consensus could be a impediment to change, especially in a radical and rapid change context. A top-down change like the Bologna reform can become a powerful source of conflict given that change in the university is usually implemented by incremental adaptations.

A third factor linked with the change process is **the complexity of the process** which creates ambivalence. Two main ideas emerge from our content analysis.

Firstly, the iterative decision process seemed to create expectations and disappointments, by first letting autonomy to professors (in a context of low framework and an appeal for change) then by putting constraints on the work done (when the framework has been conceived). This iterative process, although it may look both top-down and bottom-up, is mainly perceived as top-down by professors when constraints are to be considered. The main ambivalence here is that professors want both to be involved (empowerment) and to keep their autonomy, in the form of academic freedom. Moreover, they insist on the need for defining clear guidelines according to which they can find a framework to implement change. This reinforces the idea that the dichotomy approach of change between “top-down” (Kotter, 1995) and “bottom-up” approach (Beer et al., 1990) is partially organisational reality. We plead for a less “simplistic” view of change process that looks at a planned approach of change (top-down view), integrating room for flexibility, negotiation and reinvention by change recipients (bottom-up view), in the on-going change process in order to stimulate commitment and decrease reluctance to change.

*"It works a lot through **going up and down**, so it is an iterative and disturbing process." P-5*

*"We are expected to make propositions, but the problem is that there exists no framework. There has been **an up and down game** between central decision makers – who said not being able to define a framework without conditions – and local people -who cannot define a program structure without the rules of the game. So, at the beginning, it was difficult and gradually there has been a kind of **movement of comings and goings** between both." P-20*

Secondly, there are a lot of decision makers at different organisational levels. Some extracts refer to the garbage can decision making model for describing the process at the university. This point lets professors think they may exert little influence. At the same time, they are used to a **consensus culture**.

*"It is really the garbage can decision making model. That is, everybody defends his “folder” at all the levels, then we do not know exactly what the final decision can be, except that there is a political game from the responsible who says: “I want to reach that. I let things go, I make meetings and I try to make people converge towards that, and even if there are disagreements, I will go my way.” P-1*

*"The problem arises from the number of decision makers and actors. The Rector is more like an animator. He is the interface with the outside. He has empowered deans. Deans are the first to decide at the faculty level." P-3*

*"Actually, decisional process is far from a simple process and its implementation generates tensions between people who do not agree with the programs. It is obvious that everybody wants to defend its own interests ..." P-15*

## CONCLUSION

Firstly, our study **points out the ambivalent representations** of the professors facing change at the university. In line with Perret's study (1998), we affirm that change generates complex, diverse and sometimes contradictory representations. Reluctance to change should be analysed through the concept of ambiguity (or equivocality). Ambiguity, based on a lack of common sense, is not to be confused with uncertainty which is based on a lack of information. In line with Weick (1995), we argue that the role of the change leaders (top) and the change agents (bottom) is essentially a role of “sensemaker” in order to reduce equivocality. The problem in change implementation at the university is more concerned by confusion than ignorance. Create a common sensemaking does not mean that people need

more information. Instead, they need values, priorities, and clarity about preferences to help them be clear about which change projects matter.

Using Pettigrew's framework, we emphasized the concept of "ambivalence" through four categories: content, outer context, inner context and process of change. Although many sources of ambivalence were detected in each category, an important source of ambivalence comes from contradictory intertwined perceptions among these categories. For example, many professors are in favour of the Bologna reform (content) but in opposition to the imposed change process. In the same way, even if the content of the reform seems a progress for students, some professors are reluctant to change given the threat of this reform for their academic freedom (inner context). The ambivalent perceptions of professors explain why it is difficult to prevent change recipients behaviours. The ambivalent reactions to change make their behaviours unforeseeable. Change management at the university should be designed as an adaptative and culturally grounded process. It is illusive to search for a universal recipe that considers university as a homogeneous milieu where paradoxes do not exist.

Secondly, our study **revisits the concept of resistance to change**. Literature in change management defines resistance to change (Coch et French, 1948 ; Kotter et Schlesinger, 1979 ; Kanter et al., 1992) as a negative, irrational, counter-productive phenomenon conducted by a minority of organisational actors that managers must overcome. On the contrary, our study highlights that "*reluctance to change*" is a core component in the implementation of the Bologna process within universities. Our paper questions the assumption that resistance to change is an enemy to change and should be overcome. We argue that academic change leaders should encourage professors express reluctance to change. They will be more able to identify real problems that must be solved, and fears that key actors may have in the effective process of change.

Thirdly, reluctance to change could draw attention on some aspects of change that are maybe understated such **as cultural compatibility of the reform** (in the content, its expected results and in the process) or **different rhythms due to different subcultures**. Moreover, professors' reluctance could play a central role as a regulator within the university. While pressure from the external environment encourage major changes, reluctance to change from professors can balance the external pressures to change and the need for stability, to control a viable rhythm of change which is essential for organizational survival.

Fourthly, our results insist on the importance to create a **common sensemaking** around change at the university. In an organisational context of consensus and academic freedom, the spaces of meeting are essential to stimulate shared experiences between change recipients and create a collective sensemaking of the university future. People do not resist change per se, rather they are waiting for the potential outcomes that change can cause.

*"I think basically that there are certainly a lot of people convinced that it is worth asking questions and changing, but there are sometimes much resistance or mis-knowledge in intermediate levels, which are not necessarily resistance. Change is not seen as in a hurry or as a priority, so one gets tired... University can also get tired if it does not succeed in getting connected with faculties. So, this way through decisional organs and what really happens inside faculties is really important." P-32*

We suggest to reduce ambiguity (equivocality) in the content of Bologna reform by increasing meeting among professors from different faculties. Professors need to create shared meanings about the change. However, one should keep in mind that frequent meetings are inadequate to reduce uncertainty as long as any new significant and reliable information is not clearly given.

## RESEARCH SUGGESTIONS

Change management at the university is a promising field. Due to the European conscientisation of a changing environment, universities try to adapt through management practices where change management is of first importance. Universities are thus a prosperous field of research with its own specificities.

The objective of this study was to improve our understanding of resistance to change at the university. This study has its limitations. The most serious concern is related to the opportunity to generalize the results. Our objective was modestly to identify some regularities which should be deepened and confirmed in other European universities.

In line with Piderit (2000), resistance to change has several dimensions (emotion, belief, behaviour) to be integrated in a comprehensive way. Future researches could be focused on the link to Piderit's approach with Pettigrew's framework, emphasizing for instance emotional factors or cognitive ones as either favourable or unfavourable to a major change.

Other interesting research perspectives encompass the understanding of the creation of a sensemaking at the European level, among universities. This would move research from intra-organisational level to inter-organisational level.

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Annex 1: Coding framework (adapted from Pettigrew's categories)

Coding categories	DEFINITIONS
CONTENT	Indicators of the role played by <b>the objectives and scope of the reform</b> and the evolution of its content on the positive or negative perceptions by change recipients (professors).
PROCESS	Indicators of the role played by <b>the way change is elaborated and implemented on the field</b> towards the positive or negative perceptions by change recipients (professors).
OUTER CONTEXT	Indicators of the role played <b>by the external environment</b> on the way change is elaborated and implemented towards the positive or negative perceptions by change recipients (professors).
INNER CONTEXT	Indicators of the role played <b>by the organisation</b> on the way change is elaborated and implemented towards the positive or negative perceptions by change recipients (professors).