1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter sets up the basis of a conceptual framework for the comparative study of quality assurance in higher education. It approaches quality assurance as a policy domain and looks into the policies that are formulated and implemented therein. The objective pursued by the construction of such a framework is to check for cross-national policy convergence and the extent to which national idiosyncrasies still play a role – and, if so, of which nature – in the current context of international harmonisation. More generally, the proposed framework aims at providing a range of tools to understand cross-national convergence in quality assurance policy, the mechanisms through which this convergence takes place, the components of the quality assurance policy that converge and those that, on the contrary, do not.

This questioning is organised in three stages. After this introduction, the prospect of looking into quality assurance policies is developed. It is argued that public policies encompass two different but complementary dimensions: an ideational one, based on normative beliefs about how a policy domain should be organised, and a material one, composed of the instruments to translate these ideas and beliefs into concrete action. The notion of policy paradigm is brought forward to account for this double dimension of public policies and is constructed on the basis of the determination of fundamental choices within a policy domain and their temporal and spatial actualisation. Section 3 draws on and expands the theoretical discussion with a discussion of the fundamental choices in the domain of quality assurance policy and some potential answers. Examples drawn from England, the Netherlands, and Switzerland highlight the different situations. Then, in Section 4, the discussion turns to some of the methodological implications stemming from the adopted approach for the analysis of quality assurance in higher education. This is done by addressing the actualisation of the fundamental policy choices as well as by distinguishing between the emergence of quality assurance as a political issue, and its translation into a set of systematised policies. In the conclusions, the arguments presented are summed up.

Before commencing, I would like to stress two important points. First, most of the elements discussed in the coming pages – and indeed the theoretical posture that is developed – have been dealt with, in one way or another, in other different
publications, especially in my doctoral thesis (Perellon 2001a). To a substantial extent, this chapter constitutes both a summing up of the thoughts and suggestions brought forward in these publications, and a modest attempt to take them a step further. Second, I consider this chapter mainly as a theoretical contribution to the study of comparative higher education. As such, it concentrates principally on the discussion of various conceptual tools, while, as often as possible, also providing concrete examples drawn from the European context. I leave the reader to judge the validity of the approach and the relevance of the method.

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE AS A POLICY DOMAIN

In this chapter, I approach quality assurance as a policy located within the broader domain generally known as higher education. Such an approach places the object of investigation under the general label of policy analysis. As a field of knowledge, policy analysis is composed of a wide range of disciplines, models, and theories (Wildawsky 1979: 15). It therefore requires the adoption of a multidisciplinary approach to social reality, an approach able to account for the conceptual devices of institutionalised academic areas and to acknowledge the importance of the historical, societal, legal, and institutional contexts within which policies are formulated and implemented. Scholars involved in policy analysis pursue a variety of concerns. These can address the links between a ‘problem’ and the policies formulated to address it or the content of a policy. They can deal with the action (or absence of action) of policy makers or be concerned with the impact of a public policy in terms of outputs and outcomes (Parsons 1995: 29).

In comparative studies, policy analysis can be considered as a “field of study concerned with variations in the products of governmental activity over time and across different jurisdictions” (Hofferbert and Cingranelli 1996: 593). From another perspective, Heidenheimer, Helco, and Adams (1990: 3) consider comparative public policy as “the study of how, why and to what effect different governments pursue a particular course of action or inaction”, which sums up the stages of the policy cycle generally addressed in the literature: policy formulation, policy implementation, and policy evaluation.

Higher education studies have not been exempt from the influence of the policy analysis approach. Despite Premfors’ remark that researchers in the area of higher education do not take a crucial part in the development of policy analysis as a (sub)discipline (Premfors 1992: 1910), the interest of these researchers for policy analysis has grown considerably in recent years. They have engaged in the theoretical avenues opened by the proponents of policy analysis and taken up most of their concerns. They have done so with a national or cross-national perspective, thus providing a wide range of investigations (see, for instance, Braun 1999; Capano 1996, 1998; Cerych and Sabatier 1986; Goedegebuure and Van Vught 1994; Kogan et al. 2000; Kogan and Hanney 2000).

The questioning developed here takes up this tradition while concentrating on the role of ideas in policy analysis. Its concerns are with the ‘problem’ of quality assurance, the responses to address it in terms of public policies, and the content of