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Building institutional capacity through inclusion, or the other way around?

Implications of opening higher education to displaced students in Italy.

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Presentation overview

1 Delineating the research background: Internationalization and forced migration in HE

2 Research aims and rationale

3 Methodology

4 Preliminary findings

5 Reflections and (potential) contributions

Forced migration in HE

- **Forced migration in academia** is a phenomenon that can count many historical examples, especially because of the special nature of the university institutions rooted in the principles of autonomy and academic freedom (Cerna and Chou, 2023).

- Shifting interest from scholars to students after the so-called Refugee Crisis in 2015.

- Focus on **access and participation inequality** (Détourbe and Goastellec 2018; Lambrechts 2020; Naylor et al. 2021; Streitwiser et al. 2019), **policy implications** (Arar et al. 2020; Bacher et al. 2020; Crea 2016; Unangst and de Wit 2020), and **community belonging** (Dereli 2022; Joyce et al. 2010; Morrice 2013).

- **Forced** internationalization (Engin et al. 2019) or **humanitarian** internationalization (Streitwieser et al. 2018)?

Research aims and rationale

The research aims at exploring the extent to which – and how - the inclusion of displaced students in HE through dedicated programs redefines HEIs mission, pedagogical strategies, and internal organization. It does so by implementing some specific analytical decisions:

- Focus on the **University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs)** as the most tangible expression of institutional commitment towards displaced students.

- Complex profiles: from *refugee students* to ***displaced students***.

    ↓

    HE students who either were forced to leave their countries or are unable to return because of situations of generalized violence or targeted persecution, and then enrolled in a university institution of the receiving country.

The Italian Context

The status of internationalization:

- Reforms inspired top down by the Bologna process (Hunter, 2015);
- Reluctant state (migration) policies that produces an uneven internationalization, rewarding prestigious and resourceful HEIs (Cerna and Chou, 2023);
- Unbalanced internationalization in terms of degree levels (MA and PhD) and disciplines (STEM) (Rugge, 2019).

Including displaced students in higher education:

- Established national level measures across universities since 2015 (EU C./EACEA/Eurydice, 2022):
  - CRUI-MUR Memorandum of Understanding - 2016
  - Manifesto of the Inclusive Universities - 2019
- No available national-level statistics on the scale and characteristics of this phenomenon;
- No comparative analysis on the UPDSs.

Research questions

RQ1 What are the types of University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs) implemented by Italian HEIs in the period 2015-2023?

How did University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs) impact on the institutional capacity of the Italian HEIs? **RQ2**

Institutional capacity

Defined as "a set of formal and informal rules, norms, procedures, as well as values, beliefs, knowledge and skills, enabling the reconciliation composite policy goals, harmonisation of multiple policy instruments and coordination of relevant policy actors" (Domorenok et al. 2021, p.8).

Individual level

Knowledge, competencies and skills facilitating actual coordination and collaborative interactions between and across levels.

Organizational level

Vertical and horizontal coordination mechanisms ensuring synergies, complementarity and cooperation between and across political and administrative structures.

Systemic level

A comprehensive system of norms and rules aimed at the attainment of coherent boundary spanning policy regimes.

from Domorenok and colleagues 2021, p.8

Research Design

This work adopted a **qualitative, multi-method research design** driven by an **abductive logic** of inquiry. Two-steps selection process:

STEP 1: Selection of Italian HEIs

9 Italian HEIs selected according to the following criteria:
- Public HEIs
- Dataset and temporal variation
- Geographical representation

Consequences:
selection of big Italian HEIs, with more resources and, on average, more internationalized.

STEP 2: Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews with university personnel (*ongoing*)
- 27 academics
- 17 administratives

Documentary research:
- Selection calls
- University webpages
- Activity reports

Findings

RQ1   What are the types of University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs) implemented by Italian HEIs in the period 2015-2023?

University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs)

Financial and/or in-kind support offered by universities to enable displaced students to pursue higher education. They are identified through specific adminsitrative acts (i.e. public selection calls) and dedicated information on university websites.

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**UPDSs in the
period 2015-2023**

University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs)

	Characteristics	Entry and renewal requirements	Duration	Beneficiaries	External partnerships	Fundings	Examples
Services	Services offered by the HEIs that specifically target displaced students.	None	As needed	Displaced students already enrolled [25+]	Rare	Internal	Specific psycological counselling; specific academic support; dedicated student contracts.
Monetary Scholarships	Economic support specifically dedicated to dispalced students.	Low	One-time	Students already enrolled or new students [From 5 to 25]	Rare	Mainly internal	Citizenship-specific economic grants (i.e. Afghan students or Ukrainian students); economic grants for students from war contexts.
Full-developed programs	Dedicated program for displaced students combining economic support and dedicated services within and beyond the university.	High	Duration of the study	New students [From 1 to 4]	Highly structured	Divided among partners	University corridors for refugees; university-level programs for refugee students.

University Provisions for Displaced Students (UPDSs)
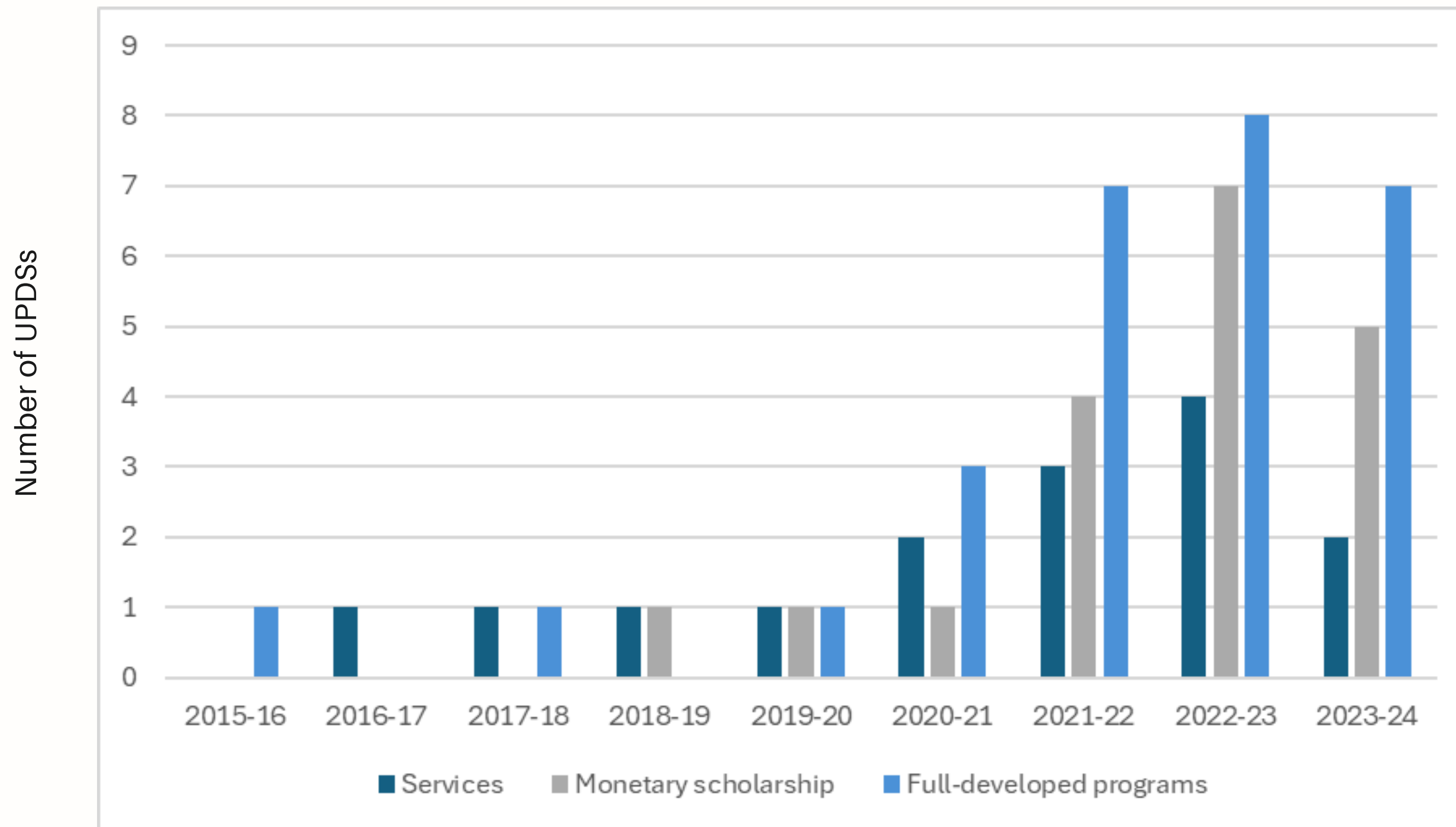
Graph 1: Presence of the three different types of UPDSs among the 9 selected HEIs, per academic year (author's elaboration)

Findings

RQ2 How did UPDSs impact on the institutional capacity of the Italian HEIs?

The individual level

"The individual level includes individual characteristics, such as competences, skills and expertise, but also knowledge, skills and motivations of policymakers and administrators" (Domorenok et al. 2021, p.9).

- UPDSs allow HEIs to capitalize on sensibilities and values that are already there.

❝ *"In my opinion, these projects have allowed the university (which is sometimes so inward-looking and focused on its scientific role) to bring out and combine the scientific dimension with the social dimension [...] giving people the opportunity to express a desire that many had within themselves, to do something not at a personal level, in their free time, but within their work"*
[Academic, former UPDSs delegate, online]

The individual level

"The individual level includes individual characteristics, such as competences, skills and expertise, but also knowledge, skills and motivations of policymakers and administrators" (Domorenok et al. 2021, p.9).

- UPDSs allow HEIs to capitalize on sensibilities and values that are already there.

- UPDSs allow HEIs to value and develop specific competences and improve services.

" *"And it was an unforgettable experience, in my opinion. And this is also what made me realize even more the urgency of defining specific actions for these categories and urging the university to establish a dedicated structure to coordinate the welcoming and management of these categories of students." [Administrative, online]*

" *"On the other hand, it means that I will change the way of being at the university. It involves questioning and considering that some of the things we have thought of for refugees, for these people, well, why can't we use them for all students tomorrow?" [Academic, UPDSs delegate, in person]*

The individual level

"The individual level includes individual characteristics, such as competences, skills and expertise, but also knowledge, skills and motivations of policymakers and administrators" (Domorenok et al. 2021, p.9).

- UPDSs allow HEIs to capitalize on sensibilities and values that are already there.

- UPDSs allow HEIs to value and develop specific competences and improve services.

However:

- Administrative and practical burdens remain deputize to few, goodwilled employees;

- Limited transferability of the acquired competences, which often remain **UPDSs-specific**.

The organizational level

"Set of institutional arrangements and procedures, which enhance interaction, coordination and synergies" (Domorenok et al. 2021, p.9) with external actors at a GLONACAL scale.

- In all cases, UPDSs increase Italian HEIs engagement with government bodies, private sector, and NGOs at different scales: **spatial embeddedness.**

- This spatial embeddedness occurs with different intensities across levels:
  - Stronger local embeddedness to meet students' needs;
  - Consultive role of national-level networks to exchange good practices;
  - Limited international embeddedness.

- Yet, **spatial embeddedness remains UPDSs-specific.**

The systemic level

"Not only established systems of policy instruments, procedures and techniques, but also policy ideas and values, which bring policy-making processes towards specific patterns of consistent actions" *(ibidem).*

UPDSs differ along two dimension:

Level of institutionalization

*Presence of a solid normative and operational framework
with clear roles, institutional responsibility
and structured monitoring.*

Low ←--→ **High**

The systemic level

"Not only established systems of policy instruments, procedures and techniques, but also policy ideas and values, which bring policy-making processes towards specific patterns of consistent actions" (ibidem).

UPDSs differ along two dimension:

Policy values

Performative ← · → Humanitarian

Predominance of values and discourses developed around the idea of merit and deserviness, talent, success of the educational career.

❝ *"The message is: let's try to give, to demonstrate academic sensitivity to emergency situations, but without replacing NGOs, because that's not our mission. The support should be aimed at promoting the academic path of students who are in difficulty, not at giving financial assistance"* [Academic, UPDSs delegate, online]

The systemic level

"Not only established systems of policy instruments, procedures and techniques, but also policy ideas and values, which bring policy-making processes towards specific patterns of consistent actions" (ibidem).

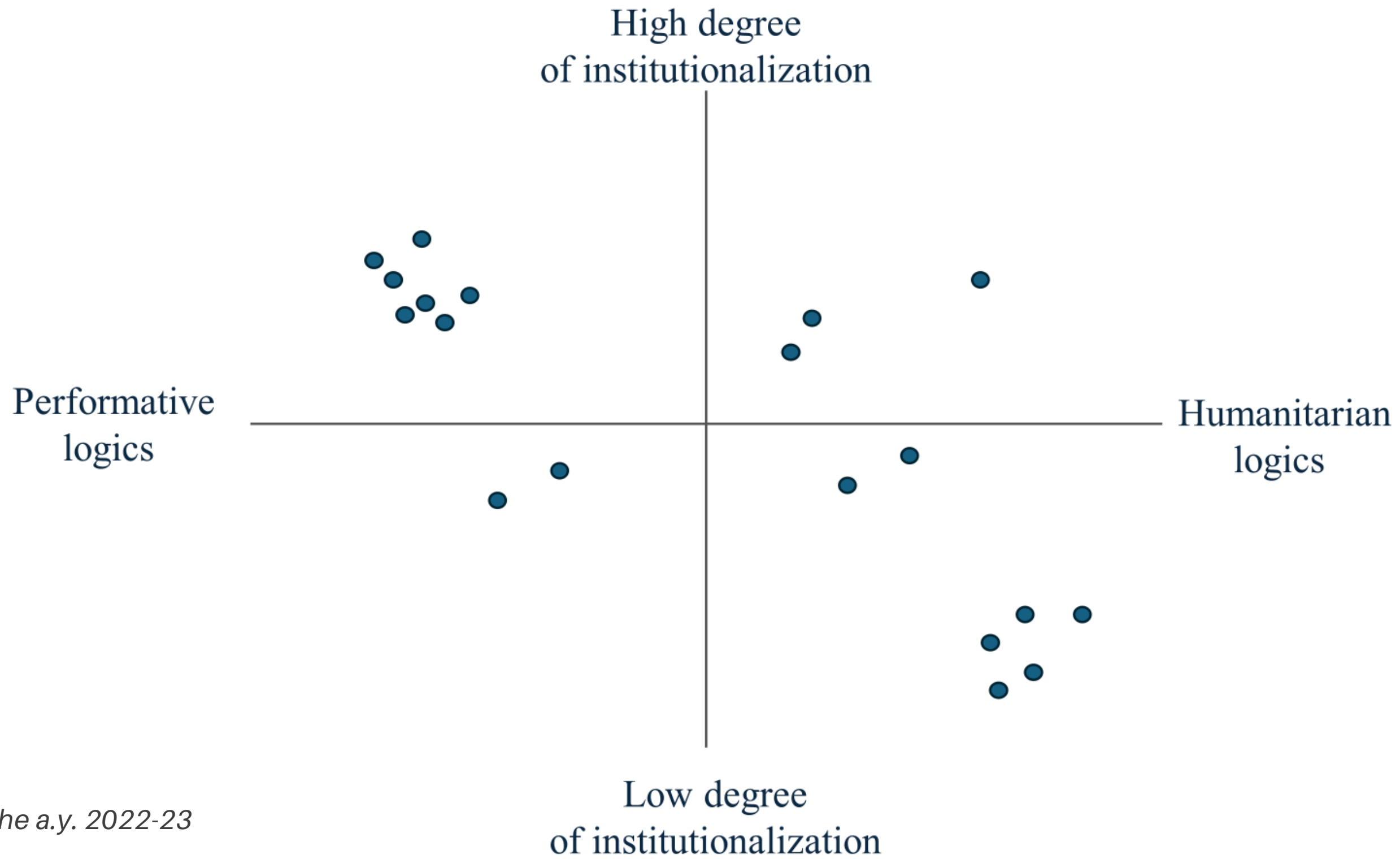UPDSs differ along two dimension:

Policy values

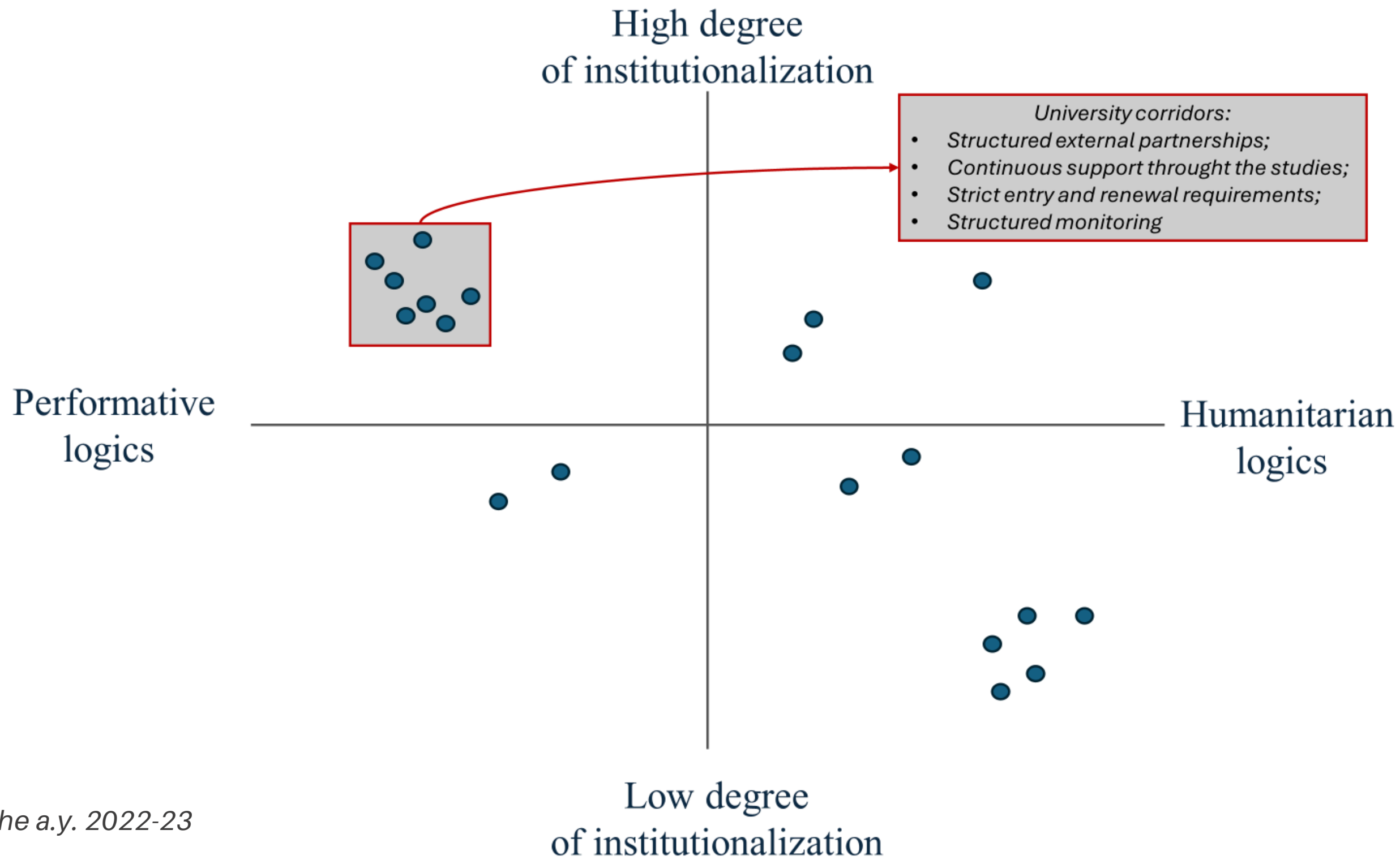**Performative** ←----------------------------------→ **Humanitarian**

❝ *We have to consider what conditions these students come from. And if the university is a bridge to get them out, why not? It's still a social role for the university. [Fieldnotes, unrecorded interview, Academic]*

Predominance of values and discourses developed around the idea of assistance, emergency, human rights protection.

The systemic level

High degree
of institutionalization

Performative
logics

Humanitarian
logics

Low degree
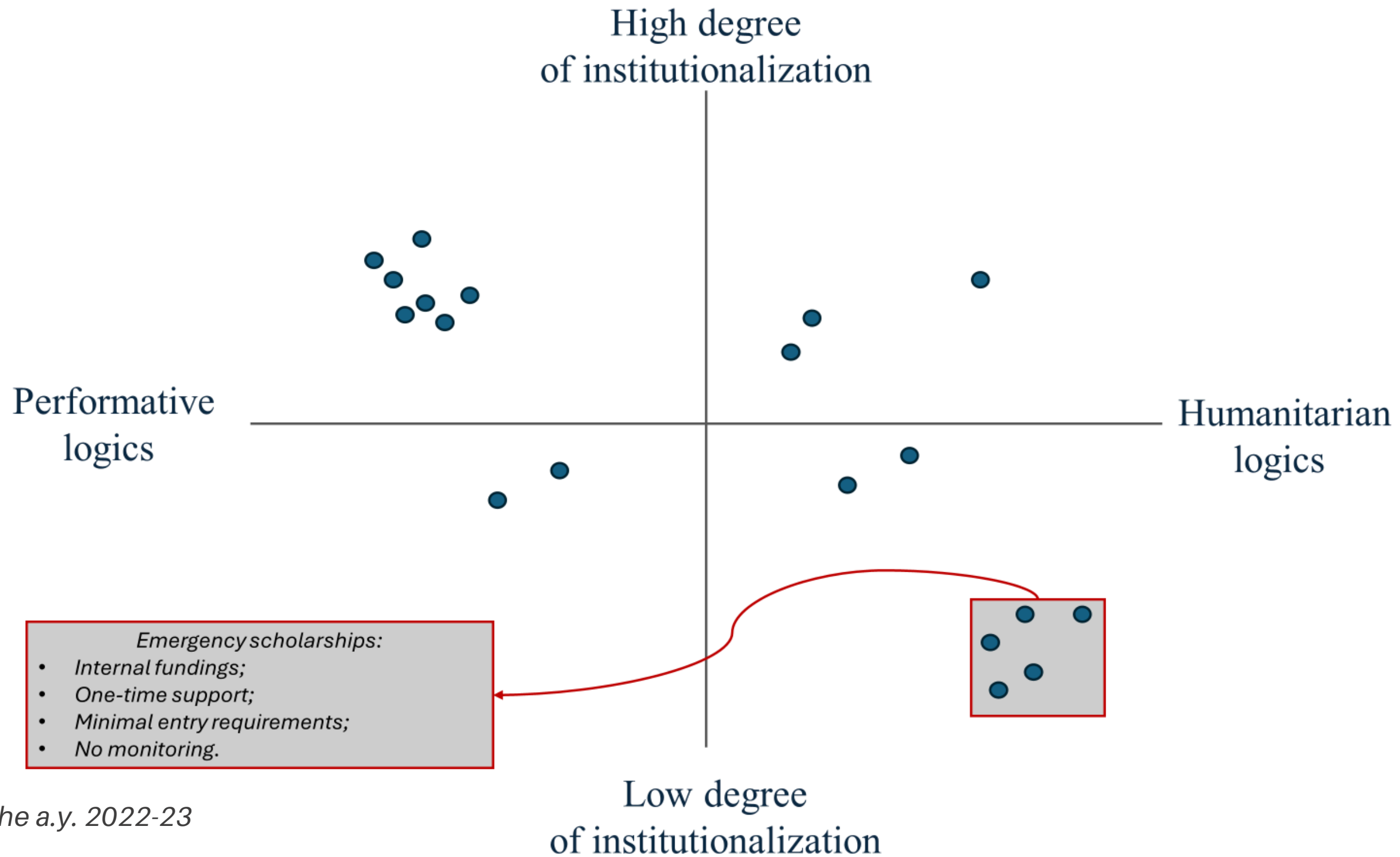of institutionalization

*As an example, UPDSs for the a.y. 2022-23
(indicative values)*

The systemic level

*As an example, UPDSs for the a.y. 2022-23 (indicative values)

The systemic level

High degree
of institutionalization

Performative
logics

Humanitarian
logics

Emergency scholarships:
- Internal fundings;
- One-time support;
- Minimal entry requirements;
- No monitoring.

Low degree
of institutionalization

*As an example, UPDSs for the a.y. 2022-23
(indicative values)

Conclusions

Does inclusion build institutional capacity? Or does institutional capacity build inclusion?

- Implementing UPDSs increases HEIs institutional capacity by developing individual competences, institutional procedures and spatial embeddedness;

- However, the lack of transferability of institutional capacity not only between but also within universities limits these practices of inclusion to consolidate;

- The negotiation between performative and humanitarian logics shows that HEIs struggle to balance equity and accountability instances.

- Limitation: quantitatively small population and lack of systematic data.

Conclusions

- Universities are actually "embedded in the social fabric of individual states" (Moscowitz and Sabzalieva, 2023, p.150) and are responsive to the complex and changing phenomenon of forced migration.

- Need to **align internationalization and third mission** agendas (Jones et al., 2022)?

- The geopolitical situation calls for a systematic integration of **displacement**, defined as "a processual, coercive, and disruptive experience" (Ali 2023, p.1084), within the framework of internationalization

Thank you!

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