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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Bologna Process as a template for transnational policy coordination

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The Bologna Process (BP) presents the largest ongoing reform initiative in higher education (HE). Although it has triggered large-scale changes in HE structures in Europe, comparative analysis about its impact on other regions of the world is scarce. Using transnational communication and sociological institutionalism as a theoretical framework, this article investigates the impact of the BP on the Asia-Pacific region, Latin America and the Caribbean [LAC] and (parts of) Africa. Our results demonstrate that not only the policies promoted in the realm of the BP, especially in the field of study structures, have been copied by non-European HE institutions, but also its governance modes for managing transnational HE reform initiatives. Thus, the BP can be regarded as a template for transnational HE harmonization processes in the absence of legal obligation.

Keywords: Bologna Process; higher education; diffusion; transnational communication; sociological institutionalism; Asia-Pacific; Latin America and the Caribbean; Africa

Introduction

Recent decades have brought about immense changes in governments' attitudes towards cross-national policy harmonization. The prime example in the field of higher education (HE) is the Bologna Process (BP). Initiated in 1999 with the objective of enhancing the comparability and compatibility of HE structures and degrees in Europe, it aims at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As a key element in social and labour market policy, education is perceived to play a central role in the transformation into a knowledge-based economy. Capable HE institutions are envisioned as having the potential to increase the competitiveness of the overall economy and further economic growth through research and innovation. Thus, the BP can be conceived as one of the greatest socio-economic reform initiatives of the last decades.

Whereas several studies about the impact of the BP on European HE systems have been conducted (see for example, Witte 2006; Westerheijden et al. 2010; Martens et al. 2010; Vögtle, Knill, and Dobbins 2011), little systematic knowledge was generated on how regions outside of Europe have responded to the BP. While some contributions focus on HE reform processes in one area of the world, comparative work on different regional

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responses to the BP is rare.¹ Even though the BP is directed at European countries, political initiatives related to HE attract international attention. On the one hand, adapting to the Bologna model makes HE systems outside of Europe more comparable with the EHEA and therefore more appealing for cooperation purposes. At the same time, countries might feel pressured to adopt policies promoted by the BP due to the competitive nature in an increasingly globalized education market. HE institutions nowadays have to balance two opposing dynamics, namely cooperation and competition; they have to coordinate their study programme structures in order to facilitate mobility while at the same time they seek to be distinct from others in order to attract national as well as international students and researchers. Thus, this article investigates how and to what extent the Bologna model has become a template for HE reform processes beyond Europe's borders.

This article proceeds as follows: the next section provides a brief overview of the BP's main goals and its development to provide the baseline for comparison with other HE reform initiatives. In our theory section we use diffusion theory, in particular the concept of transnational communication, to investigate how the content and governance modes of the BP have become a global model for HE reform initiatives. By combining the reasoning of transnational communication with sociological institutionalism we account for the high degree of autonomy of HE institutions outside of Europe, which nonetheless voluntarily adopt policies promoted by the BP as well as Bologna-style reform initiatives. However, we do not analyse implementation efforts, but cross-national HE reform initiatives of three regions: Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) and (parts of) Africa.

Our results demonstrate that policies promoted within the Bologna framework, such as length of study programmes and actors involved in quality assurance, are diffused beyond the original geographical borders. Moreover, the governance modes of the BP, regular intergovernmental conferences and working groups that prepare the agenda for these summits have been reproduced. These governance modes seem apt to integrate actors from very different societal groups and further cooperation that cannot be established in a purely legislative manner. In particular, countries reliant on the influx of fee-paying foreign students for financing their HE system and countries dependent on cooperation with Europe for the functioning of their HE sector and labour market are eager to adopt Bologna-style policies. While Bologna-type policy models are diffused through transnational communication networks, cultural and institutional similarities as well as mutual dependencies enhance the cooperation processes and further commitment to it.

The BP: actors, development and goals

In 1998, the education ministers of France, Italy, Great Britain and Germany signed the Sorbonne Declaration (1998), therewith attempting to harmonize the architecture of the European HE systems. This first step towards adjusting national HE systems was substantiated one year later with the Bologna Declaration (1999), which was adopted by 29 European education ministers and led to the BP. By 2012, 47 states had joined the BP; that means that – with the exception of Belarus – the BP covers the whole of Europe and bordering states. In addition to governmental members, the Commission of the European Union became a full member of the process in 2003 as well as several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and interest groups which joined the process as advising institutions.

Considerations of the impact of the EHEA in the context of worldwide HE have been under way since the BP itself was launched in 1999. These considerations have been denominated external dimension of the BP. Since the Bergen Communiqué (2005), this external dimension has been formalized. It was agreed that the EHEA should be open to other parts of the world and allow for exchange with other HE systems and regions. Since then, additional strategy papers for how this cooperation could look like led to the first Bologna Policy Forum which was held in Leuven in 2009. This forum was to bring together the ministers of education from the Bologna area with representatives from Australia, Brazil, Canada, P.R. China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan (not yet a Bologna member at that time), Kyrgyzstan, Mexico, Morocco, New Zealand, Tunisia and the USA. Since then, the Bologna Policy Forum has grown in size so that by now 73 countries (including the 47 EHEA countries) participate.

The BP's central aim has been the creation of the EHEA by 2010 with a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. Basic objectives include the introduction of a three-tier study system, a common credit transfer system, the promotion of academic mobility and cooperation in quality assurance. Foremost among these objectives at the institutional level are the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the standardized Diploma Supplement, a transcript of credits from courses undertaken and degrees obtained. Figure 1 summarizes the goals agreed upon through the BP; they are depicted by the year and communiqué which delineates measures to be taken.

Some of the objectives of the BP represent tangible measures, while others are mere statements of intention. Importantly, the education ministers agreed on measures aiming at a *structural* convergence of academic programmes (see Olsen and Maassen 2007), not at harmonizing their *content*. The process can be characterized as expanding in terms of objectives, participants and consultative members. As a result, coordination structures such as the secretariat, the preparatory group and the follow-up group have been established. Additionally, the jointly agreed-upon objectives are monitored and promoted by means of institutionalized communication, benchmarking measures (such as the stocktaking reports) and information exchange within transnational policy networks, including biannual ministerial meetings, follow-up groups, national committees and national Bologna groups supporting the responsible ministries. In essence, the structure and the content of the BP aim at an integrative HE model, which could, in principle, be copied by other regions.

Theoretical framework of transnational policy diffusion

Although the BP is not based on an intergovernmental treaty, participation is voluntary, recommendations are non-binding, and non-compliance cannot be sanctioned, it has brought about large-scale and ongoing reform processes of European HE policies. Hence, patterns of international governance that rely exclusively on processes of communication and information exchange must be present. A mechanism believed to induce policy diffusion while solely relying on cross-national communication and information exchange is transnational communication (Holzinger and Knill 2005). Four mechanisms are subsumed under the concept of transnational communication, focusing on the origins of cross-national policy diffusion: *lesson-drawing*, *transnational problem-solving*, *policy emulation* and *international policy promotion*.

When it comes to implementing new policy contents and governance modes, the term *lesson-drawing* (Rose 1991) denotes a process where one state learns from another what

has to be done or omitted when certain problems occur. Lesson-drawing implies the existence of a 'best option' or policies perceived as such. Following this reasoning, the most effective and cost-efficient way to reform policies is to use examples and models developed elsewhere (Braun and Benninghoff 2003). *Transnational problem-solving* highlights that solutions are sought and found in transnational elite networks or epistemic communities (see Haas 1992). In these networks, a common perspective develops, which lays the foundation for international harmonization activities. These networks can include transfer agents, such as international organizations, facilitating the exchange between polities and providing an important vehicle for the spread of policies (Stone 2004). In contrast, *policy emulation* describes a one-directional policy transfer, a process of copying foreign policies and implementing them without adaptation to national conditions and contexts due to time pressure and resource constraints. Policy emulation implies that reformers imitate rather than innovate (Brunsson and Olsen 1993): the mere fact that many others implemented the policy suffices to perceive it as successful. With *international policy promotion*, organizations specialized in a certain field actively promote certain policies while defining objectives and standards in an international setting (Holzinger and Knill 2008). Countries diverging from promoted policy models or countries performing poorly in international rankings may feel pressured to justify their divergent systems to that of the promoter (Holzinger and Knill 2005). Adapting a model promoted by an international organization considered as competent in the respective policy field is a resource-saving way of implementing the model commonly accepted as the best option.

For the purposes of this article, transnational communication serves as a framework for observing the occurrence of cross-national HE policy diffusion in the absence of legally binding agreements. First, we assume that countries and HE institutions outside of Europe facing similar problems as the European countries and institutions monitor the BP and engage in lesson-drawing, thus adopting policies promoted in the realm of the BP and/or seeking to develop a regional reform initiative comparable to the BP. Second, we expect countries outside of Europe to launch Bologna-style regional reform initiatives, but adapt the Bologna policies and governance modes according to their specific level of development and cooperation needs, thus engaging in transnational problem-solving. Third, more countries are informed about the policy choices of BP participants, and as soon as a threshold in the number of policy adopters is reached, the more likely the emulation of policies becomes. Fourth, we assume that international organizations engage in promoting policies such as those of the BP as a resource-saving way to reform HE systems in order to confront economic problems.

However, transnational communication does not provide explicit assumptions about conditions favourable for furthering adoption of policies promoted in international networks. It does not give reasons for differences in commitment and implementation, speed and patterns. HE institutions are expected to more or less voluntarily adopt policies promoted internationally. Particularly in non-European countries, HE institutions are autonomous from governmental influences; frequently they are independent, privately funded institutions. In order to delineate why organizations below the state level may agree to adhere to reform principles agreed upon in an international setting we refer to *sociological institutionalism* (Meyer and Rowan 1978; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Sociological institutionalism analyses the reproduction or imitation of organizational structures, activities and routines in response to external pressure. It emphasizes the importance of the *organizational field* in which institutions operate, the role of *shared beliefs*, *legitimacy* for an organizations' survival and *cultural ties* between actors.

Increased internationalization of education policy has led HE institutions to be attentive to the activities of institutions beyond their home countries. First, HE institutions cooperate and compete worldwide for resources such as academic reputation, excellent academic staff and domestic as well as foreign students. They can be perceived as inhabiting the same organizational field in which competitive pressure is exhibited due to certification and accreditation by bodies defining standards and best practices. Second, those promoting best practices share beliefs about the nature of the perceived educational crisis and these shared beliefs are essential for transmitting norms to third parties who did not play a role in constructing them (Berger and Luckmann 1967). Certification and accreditation by bodies defining standards and best practices can be regarded as a prime indicator of conferred shared beliefs (Dowling and Pfeffer 1975; Ruef and Scott 1998). Third, we expect HE institutions in other regions of the world to adopt the propositions of the BP because it can be regarded as a socially constructed system able to provide imitators outside of Europe with legitimacy when adhering to the set of norms set up in the process (see Peters 2005; Suchmann 1995). Hence, individual institutions outside of Europe are expected to be responsive to the BP out of fear of losing legitimacy. Fourth, many non-European countries share common languages and political–institutional similarities with European countries due to colonial legacies; ‘[h]istorically, the present education systems in many of the countries of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania are the products of past colonial penetration’ (Arnove 1980, 48). Such cultural ties can be expected to be taken into account by decision-makers of individual institutions (Strang and Meyer 1993; Lenschow, Liefferink, and Veenman 2005). Nowadays, cooperation between European countries and former colonies in the realm of regionally organized supranational organizations has replaced the direct influence of the former rulers. Therefore, we expect institutions in countries with historically strong cultural ties to European countries to be particularly responsive to the BP and eager to engage in similar reform initiatives themselves.

In essence, we hypothesise that the BP can be regarded as an institutionalized structure for the exchange of information among participating, as well as non-participating, countries as explored by transnational communication mechanisms. Sociological institutionalism provides answers to the central question why autonomous non-European HE institutions should follow the pathway of the Bologna reforms.

The impact of the BP on non-European regions

This section brings into focus the diffusion of the BP policy content and its governance mode. We look particularly at: (1) the adoption or preparation of specific HE policies promoted by the BP, such as the two- and three-tier programme structure, ECTS, Diploma Supplements and strengthened efforts in quality assurance and (2) regional HE policy initiatives and cooperative structures resembling governance modes of the BP, such as declarations, voluntary commitments, communiqués, benchmark reports and regular meetings. By examining how the BP is mirrored in other regions we presume that HE reforms are a form of ‘regulatory regionalism’ (see Jayasuriya 2008 and Jayasuriya and Robertson 2010 on this concept). Our focus rests on regional reform initiatives resembling the policy contents as well as the governance modes of the BP, not on regional and interregional cooperation in the field of HE per se. Thus, the North American continent is not included in this analysis as there has not yet been a cross-national HE initiative resembling the BP.

The Asia-Pacific region

In spring of 2006, 27 ministers from countries in the Asia-Pacific zone met in Brisbane to discuss how to respond to the Bologna challenge and create stronger regional links. The result of the meeting was a document denominated Brisbane Communiqué, which set up an international working group to assess the conditions and suitability for BP style reforms in the Asia-Pacific region. The overarching objective of what is becoming known as the Brisbane Process now with 52 member states is to better align the education systems and approaches of the broader Asia-Pacific region with international developments. The education ministers agreed to collaborate on quality assurance frameworks, qualification recognition, common competency-based standards for teachers and the development of a common recognition of technical skills. In organizational terms, the meeting spawned different follow-up groups and studies to examine issues of quality assurance, encouragement of student mobility and the mutual recognition of qualifications throughout the region. Much like the BP follow-up group, the ministers continue to meet on a biannual basis to discuss progress regarding these reforms (Clark 2007), and as is the case with the BP, various stakeholders are incorporated into the process.

In general, the Brisbane Communiqué's (2006) normative goals and institutional initiatives seem to follow the Bologna model in which the creation of a common regional HE space is envisioned. However, due to the different demographic and socio-economic background as well as the political framework of the countries involved a 'Bolognization of the Asia-Pacific region' is not to be expected, rather the BP can serve as a model for the creation of a future Asia-Pacific HE area (Chao 2011). Since the BP is the first successful initiative in the harmonization of regional HE systems, it is perceived as setting the benchmarks towards which other regional initiatives, like the Brisbane Process, can strive. Despite the adoption of various Bologna-style policies and governance structures in the Asia-Pacific region, the process remains in a far earlier stage than its European model. In particular, important components of the BP such as harmonizing HE systems into a three-cycle structure or student mobility schemes have not been institutionalized nor have been on the agenda of the participating states.

Australia and New Zealand have been particularly active promoters in launching this process of HE harmonization in the Asia-Pacific region. As large providers of tertiary education to foreign students (Martens and Starke 2008), trade in education services is crucial to both countries' overall economic performance. Moreover, it represents an important source of private income for universities (DEST 2006). Any developments which could threaten their standing, e.g. another region drawing students away from Australia and New Zealand, inevitably become a subject of discussion and debate. The BP challenges the countries' economic position in the international student market. Thus, various measures have been taken to adhere to the Bologna model in order to keep Australia and New Zealand attractive for students and not to become – as a former Australian minister for education expressed it – a 'Bologna outsider' (Bishop 2006, 9). Examples of how the content of the BP has been imitated include the introduction of a Diploma Supplement and the compatibility of the Australian credit transfer system with ECTS based on student workload. The Australian as well as the New Zealand quality assurance agencies applied to join the European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies in order to facilitate communication and demonstrate compatibility with Bologna policies. Moreover, around 16 Australian HE institutions have so far taken measures to comply with Bologna standards as regards workload and credit transfer information.

In brief, the reaction to the BP in the Asia-Pacific region is the establishment of its own regional cooperative initiative. This Brisbane Process incorporates many elements of the BP with regard to goals and governance structures and, therefore, the launching of the Brisbane Process can be regarded as a process of lesson-drawing. Driving forces of this harmonization process in the Asia-Pacific region have been Australia and New Zealand. Inhabiting the same organizational field as institutions in the EHEA, Australian and New Zealand HE institutions seek to become and remain compatible by adhering to standards set by the BP, thus being perceived as legitimate actors in their organizational surrounding. At the same time, they do not need to undertake major structural reforms to implement the policies set out in the Brisbane Communiqué as they already operate with many policies similar to those promoted by the BP. Instead, HE issues specifically relevant for the Asia-Pacific region, such as common skills recognition, are incorporated into the Brisbane Process and can be regarded as a form of transnational problem-solving. Due to its standard setting and benchmarking activities of issuing reports and figures on educational issues and socio-economic developments, the OECD functions as an international policy promoter. In essence, the Brisbane Process cannot be regarded as a copy of the BP; but the BP surely provided a template for the content and, especially, governance structure of the process.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Latin America (LA) national HE systems face severe structural, organizational and functional obstacles in harmonizing their HE systems (Ferrer 2010, 606). In particular, the context in which LA's universities operate presents significant challenges and obstacles in adapting to processes of internationalization and regionalization in the field of HE (Gacel-Ávila 2007): student mobility is the lowest of any region in the world. Only a small portion of researchers and full-time faculties are eligible to benefit from exchange or mobility programmes and knowledge expansion is leading to continuing brain drain. Institutions in LA lack internationalization policies and organizational strategies for a systematic and systemic development of cooperation processes. Thus, the desirability and feasibility of establishing a common HE area in LA in a process similar to the BP is a subject of debate in the region (Gacel-Ávila 2011; Aboites 2010; Figueroa 2010).

A main reason for LA's reservation lies in the governing structures of HE institutions in the region. In contrast to Europe, where most governments have the ability to decisively intervene in the coordination of their tertiary education systems, LA governments limit themselves to financing the institutions while leaving the coordination to institutional and corporate interests. Moreover, a strong and growing presence of private tertiary institutions operating independently of state funds accounts for an average of about 47% of LA's total enrolment (Brunner 2009). Nonetheless, the BP has had an impact in LA by raising new issues and encouraging discussions among academics and governments. The major and most directly relevant topics for discussion in LA include the length of study programmes, architecture of degrees and diplomas, standards of quality assurance, the establishment of regional HE areas and international competitiveness of Latin American HE institutions (Brunner 2009).

Two regional university networks have been providing the building blocks for the creation of a Latin American and Caribbean Area for HE: the Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE) and the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUAL). These two organizations have been seeking to establish an academic

synergy in collaboration with other national and regional organizations and university networks (OUI 2010). Hence, in LA the universities themselves have started the process of regional harmonization and HE policy convergence, rather than the governments through their education ministers, as in the case of the BP.

The Lima Declaration (2009), an initiative signed by representatives of university networks and councils of chancellors of 13 LAC countries in June 2009, comes closest to the BP. It aims at enhancing regional cooperation by promoting a Latin American and Caribbean Area for HE. By signing the declaration, the universities commit themselves to foster support for this initiative through their governments and bilateral and multilateral organizations of the region, as well as through different sectors of society. The goals delineated in the Lima Declaration resemble those of the BP to a great extent. The most tangible objectives are the achievement of greater compatibility between programmes and HE systems. This is foreseen by harmonizing national and sub-regional accreditation systems and by mutual recognition of study periods, titles and diplomas. Further goals are intra-regional mobility of students, scholars and administrative personnel, and the creation of multi-university and multi-disciplinary research networks. These networks should encourage shared distance education programmes as well as support for creating institutions of a regional character which combine Internet-based and regular education. Moreover, the Lima Declaration outlines organizational governance structures resembling the BP with a follow-up committee providing consultative and technical support and holding supervision functions. The UNESCO-IESALC [International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC, Instituto Internacional para la Educación Superior en América Latina y el Caribe)] has been made responsible for the development of a concrete working agenda of the Lima Declaration.

Additionally, Bologna-style initiatives based on a common linguistic and historical background have been launched. One of them is the creation of an Ibero-American area of knowledge. Since their meeting in Salamanca (2005), governments of Ibero-American states, taking up the idea from the organization of rectors of Ibero-American universities, have built on and continue to emphasize academic cooperation towards a common area for HE. With the 2005 Declaration of Salamanca, Ibero-American Heads of States and Governments 'expressed the agreement to advance the creation of an Ibero-American knowledge area, oriented toward the transformation of HE and stressing research, development and innovation as necessary conditions to increase the region's international competitiveness' (Brunner 2009, 13). Since then, annual meetings of Ibero-American education ministers take place to prepare the agenda on educational issues for the meeting of heads of states that follow. Almost every declaration from these meetings refers to the Ibero-American area of knowledge – called EIC [Espacio Iberoamericano de Conocimiento] – and further substantiates its aims and cooperation mechanisms. Between 2005 and 2011, the heads of states and governments of Ibero-American states agreed to further academic staff and student mobility (Montevideo Declaration 2006), approved a programme for student and lecturer mobility (El Salvador Declaration 2008) and expressed their wish for convergence of HE systems in the region (Mar del Plata Declaration 2010a). They agreed to establish a mechanism for the recognition of degrees in the region and the introduction and enhancement of quality assurance systems (Mar del Plata Declaration 2010b). The education ministers also agreed to establish a secretariat in order to enhance the coordination of the EIC (Buenos Aires Declaration 2010). Thus, not only the goals of the Ibero-American initiative for closer regional cooperation but also the governance structures of the process resemble those of the BP to a large extent. Moreover, the Ibero-American

education ministers explicitly refer to European experiences in their documents; hence they directly refer to the BP as a model for their HE integration process.

In sum, the BP has radiated to LA and the Caribbean and triggered discussions that, had it not existed, might not have taken place or would have developed on the local level in only a few countries (Brunner 2009). The launching of the diverse cross-national HE reform initiatives, therefore, presents a process of lesson-drawing from the European model. Even though the Lima Declaration bears no reference to the BP, it had an ideational impact on the creation of a LAC HE area, providing best practices for reforming HE institutions and templates for governing a process of policy adaptation in the absence of legal obligation. In the case of LA, harmonization initiatives are mainly driven by the institutions themselves and on the basis of cultural ties, such as linguistic grounds. The LAC HE institutions have entrusted UNESCO to coordinate the harmonization process. Thus, in the case of LAC, an international policy promoter was not only integrated into the governance structure, as is the case with the BP, but also was assigned the most central position in the governance process.

The African continent

While in the past Africa's activities in HE focused on cooperation with the North (see for example, the 1995 Barcelona Declaration), in recent years various regional intra-African initiatives have been established. Unlike in the Bologna zone, where economic motives were a driving force for harmonizing HE systems, on the African continent strengthening the academic quality of HE institutions provides a dominant impetus for cooperation (Teferra and Knight 2008). Despite financial constraints, African universities seek to enhance the development of better institutional capacities and structures through common initiatives. Similar to LA, the driving actors for cooperative initiatives in Africa are the universities themselves, university associations, and regional and international foundations, as well as agencies (Jowi 2009, 271).

Portugal's concern for the development of its former colonies is reflected in its efforts to enhance education and training of the young people and administrative staff in its former colonies (Luijten-Lub, Van der Wende, and Huisman 2005, 149). Therefore it is not surprising that an early cooperative initiative in the field of HE including African countries and institutions involved the Portuguese-speaking countries. The Fortaleza Declaration of August 2005 aims at establishing a HE area of the Community of the Portuguese-Speaking Countries. It sets the mutual and international recognition of degrees offered in participating countries, promotion of student and academic staff mobility and structural convergence of HE formation as priorities. With the declaration, the formation of a follow-up group has come about, composed of a representative of each of the ministries responsible for HE and a representative of the Association of Portuguese-Speaking Universities. The meeting of ministers in December 2005 approved a two-year plan dealing with the establishment of a network of information centres about HE systems and the mobility of students and teaching staff. The primary function of this network is to promote convergence with the BP and the Lisbon Convention (1997). In particular, cooperation among national systems of evaluation is encouraged as is the promotion of inter-institutional cooperation through the development of networks involving activities of teaching and research, including student and teaching staff mobility (Zgaga 2006).

Another initiative for regional integration in the field of HE incorporating African countries is the Tarragona Declaration (2005) of Mediterranean countries. With this

declaration, rectors and representatives of 33 participating universities aim at creating a Euro-Mediterranean Area of HE and Research, fostering collaboration and dialogue among educational institutions and increasing the efficiency of institutions and the quality of teaching and research. One tangible objective is the creation of a HE network of universities and research centres in the Mediterranean region, which is supported by national and regional political institutions of the countries involved. This network strives to foster the development of competencies by means of joint research programmes and teaching and training programmes for academic, technical and administrative staff.

Furthermore, discussions about the creation of a single HE area on the African continent have begun. A 2009 communiqué of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education was followed up by the Working Group on Higher Education of the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA/WGHE). The working group convened a brainstorming workshop of African HE experts and representatives of key Pan-African organizations to explore the concept of creating an African Higher Education and Research Space (AHERS). The workshop held in Accra, Ghana, in December 2010 had the support of the African Union Commission and was hosted by the Association of African Universities; all the major African HE stakeholders participated. It was acknowledged that Africa shares many common drivers for educational reform with Europe, for instance, expansion of HE, employability, globalization or skills shortage. However, crucial differences like demographics and quality of academic infrastructure, as well as local challenges exist. While Africa learns from the European experience by creating its own HE and research space, it does not simply imitate the BP. The basic objectives of creating an AHERS are to strengthen the capacity of African HE institutions through collaboration in teaching and research, to improve the quality of HE and to promote academic mobility across the continent through the recognition of academic qualifications. An important outcome of the Accra workshop was for ADEA/WGHE to commission an analytical study on the creation of AHERS. The terms of reference of the study, including the fields to be considered, the methodology to be adopted, and the time frame, were identified. At the Conference of Rectors, Vice-Chancellors, and Presidents of the Association of African Universities in June 2011, further concepts for an African Union harmonization strategy towards the establishment of the AHERS by 2015 were discussed. In particular, certain components of the BP, such as the credit transfer system and the quality assurance network, are considered as useful lessons for the African harmonization approach (Oyewole 2011; Woldetensae 2011).

In addition to the creation of initiatives and networks involving the African continent, the BP has also had a direct impact on individual African states and their HE systems. Reforms are initiated in almost all African countries; the conversion to two-semester academic years, three-cycle study programmes, and the division of curricula into credits is the focus of attention (Sall and Ndjaye 2007). In particular, the Maghreb countries are now realigning their HE systems with the three-tier system following the 3(BA)+2(MA)+3(Ph.D.) structure. In addition to, and independently from, the initiatives creating HE areas between African, Asian and European countries, some African countries directly emulate the reforms bundled by the BP without modifying them to the context or without connection to regional initiatives. In 2005, member countries of the Economic Community of Central African States adopted Bologna-style programme structures. In contrast, in sub-Saharan Africa, the impact of the BP is less obvious.

In sum, as has been the case with Latin American HE reform initiatives, historical and cultural ties account for the fact that more and more African countries are adhering to the

academic reform principles initiated by the BP (Sall and Ndjaye 2007). These adoption patterns should not merely be understood as voluntary lesson-drawing due to cultural similarity. Institutions in these countries have also come under great pressure to emulate Bologna policies since their former colonial powers began changing their HE systems. Non-adoption of Bologna policies would cause difficulties for African universities with regard to their organizational environment and could lead to a loss of organizational legitimacy. Thus, it is not surprising that reform efforts are focused more on collaboration with European countries and emulation of European policies than on transnational problem-solving with neighbouring countries. It is a difficult task for African universities to follow the reform path of the BP since they lack resources for reforms and for the establishment of proper quality parameters to ensure the quality of university education. Due to a lack of trained employees, prospering African countries have begun to attract high-skilled employers from their former colonial power, such as Angola in respect to Portugal. Even though some countries experience a sharp economic upturn, the problem of insufficient access to and provision of HE remains virulent on the African continent. There is a high risk that, due to universities' lack of capacity for reform, a brain drain of African scholars to Europe will exacerbate the problems facing Africa's development initiatives, and developing countries will remain mere consumers of knowledge produced in developed countries.

Comparison of regional harmonization initiatives

Historical and political ties between European countries and their former colonies still influence current HE education policies and practices; however, they are not determining. The analysis of international HE reform processes by region provides a mixed picture in regard to the driving forces behind regional cooperation and the coverage of countries involved. [Table 1](#) summarizes the declarations and communiqués according to geographical proximity or cultural commonalities, such as a common language or institutional similarity. They are benchmarked against the policies promoted by the BP and its governance structure.

All in all, the BP has had a significant impact on the discussion about HE provision on a global scale. While in the Asia-Pacific region governments are the primary launchers of initiatives for the creation of a common regional HE space, international and regional organizations or universities and their associations are the main promoters in LA and the Caribbean as well as on the African continent. Due to their universities' high degree of autonomy, the large private HE sector and the lack of regional cooperation, governments in the LAC region are restrained in their attempts to reform their HE systems. Thus, in contrast to the top-down character of the BP driven by governments, regional cooperation primarily involved the individual universities delivering educational programmes. Moreover, initiatives in LA and the Caribbean as well as on the African continent are more often based on a common language and cooperation with former colonial powers than on the idea of a whole continent being one educational zone regardless of the diversity of languages – as is the case in the BP. Despite varying geographical range and depth, the different integrative processes in the Asia-Pacific and LAC region as well as on the African continent state similar goals as the BP. However, the mere fact that these initiatives have been launched does not provide evidence that reform efforts are actually under way.

This article focused on the examination of the impact of the BP as a model for worldwide HE harmonization processes. We referred to established theoretical approaches, namely sociological institutionalism and transnational communication, for

Table 1. Initiatives for the creation of HE areas, adapted from Vögtle 2010.

Cooperation approach	Founding document	Countries from which regions participate	Launched by	Goals compatible with Bologna goals	Governance of the process
Regional	Brisbane Communiqué (2006)	Asia-Pacific	Governments	Quality assurance frameworks; recognition of educational and professional qualifications; greater student and academic mobility; transferability of qualifications	Biannual meetings; working group; secretariat; interim reports
Regional	Lima Declaration (2009)	LA and Caribbean	University networks	LA and Caribbean Area of HE (ENLACES); compatibility between programmes, institutions, modalities and systems; convergence of national and sub-regional assessment and accreditation systems; compatibility of degrees; academic mobility	Follow-up committee; UNESCO-IESALC develops working agenda
Regional	Tarragona Declaration (2005)	Africa and Europe	University networks; Governments	Euro-Mediterranean HE area; comparability and readability of HE systems; transferable credits and easily readable qualifications; common evaluation methods and quality assurance schemes; mobility of students, researchers, and professors	Biannual meetings; follow-up group
Cultural	EULAC (since 2000)	LA and Caribbean, Europe	Governments	EULAC common area of HE; compatible credit systems; comparability of degrees	Quadrennial meetings; EULAC Common Space Follow-up Committee; Action Plan (2002–2008)
Cultural	Fortaleza Declaration (2004)	Africa, Europe and Asia	University networks; Governments	Creation of lusophone HE area; establishment of quality assurance systems; student and teaching, research and technical staff mobility; mutual and international recognition of qualifications and double degrees	Follow-up group; establishment of information centres about HE systems and the recognition and mobility of students and teaching staff
Cultural	Salamanca Declaration (2005), Mar del Plata Declaration (2010a, 2010b)	LA and Caribbean, Europe	University networks; Governments	Ibero-American area of knowledge; recognition of educational and professional qualifications; greater student and academic mobility; transferability of qualifications; establishment of quality assurance systems	Annual meetings; secretariat; Ibero-American network of HE accreditation agencies (RIACES)

guiding our analyses. Our aim was to analyse the extent to which the policies and the governance modes of the BP have been diffused on a global scale. As our results have shown, the BP reform agenda has become a template for worldwide HE reforms. However, this does not imply that all Bologna-style policies and governance modes have to be implemented as a ‘wholesale package’. Countries have taken the Bologna reforms and their governance modes as a reference point for their own reform efforts; some consider the adoption of selected reforms and others seek to implement large-scale changes. However, the extent to which non-European countries’ HE systems possess the capability to adopt Bologna-style reforms varies greatly. Further research should focus on the development of regional initiatives and the implementation efforts of the countries partaking in these regional harmonization processes.

In this article, we understood the BP as a form of transnational communication, which is believed to trigger HE policy adaptation. The policy coordination initiatives depicted in [Table 1](#) solely rest on communication and information exchange, yet they have led to factual cross-national policy harmonization; but the degree to which reforms are actually executed differs to a large extent. Bologna-style policy reforms are undertaken globally, so non-compliance to these environmental pressures poses a risk of legitimacy loss and the disregard as a partner for cooperation purposes. Bologna-style policy reforms merely concern structural reforms; they do not touch upon policy content or shift power constellations between the HE stakeholders. The education ministers agreed on measures aiming to harmonize the structure and comparability of HE programmes (see [Figure 1](#)); they neither touched upon the programmes’ content nor the HE institutions’ governance structures. It is not the goal of any of the proposed policies or governance modes to rebalance power distributions between the different stakeholders in the field of HE. The attractiveness of the BP is due to the fact that the process primarily concentrates on ‘product control’. Leaving enough leeway for signatory states to reform their HE policies according to national contexts and national political preferences, the Bologna model can be called a framework – for it only prescribes the structure, not the content, of HE programmes and their provision.

The assumptions derived from sociological institutionalism have proven to be reasonable instruments for explaining the willingness and need of individual institutions to engage in adaptation processes. Overall, the governance modes of the BP have established it as a useful mechanism for coordinating dynamic, non-binding policy harmonization processes characterized by the inclusion of a variety of actors on different levels of authority, such as governmental actors, NGOs, and associations. We thus conclude that transnational communication has the potential to induce countries as well as individual organizations to consider policy reforms in the absence of legal obligation, at least if they are mere structural reforms. It has the strength to induce large-scale reforms in terms of geographical scope as well as in terms of substantial policy change. However, the question if transnational communication has the potential to induce cross-national policy harmonization beyond structural convergence or in policy fields that operate in a strictly national context such as – for instance – social policy remains unresolved. Yet, we are confident that the BP has produced a transnational platform for HE policy diffusion beyond its participating states. It has created channels through which norms established in a European context could diffuse to other parts of the world, and thus, a global policy culture with regard to HE provisions has been established.

Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	Common framework for qualifications	
	Creation of EHEA	Creation of EHEA	Creation of EHEA	Creation of EHEA	Creation of EHEA	Creation of EHEA	Launching of EHEA	EHEA in place	
	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	Diploma Supplement	
	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	Two-cycle system	
	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	Credit transfer system	
		Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	Lifelong learning	
			Quality assurance	Quality assurance	Quality assurance	Quality assurance	Quality assurance	Quality assurance	
			Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	Three-cycle system (including doctoral level)	
				Standards and guidelines for quality assurance	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance	Standards and guidelines for quality assurance	
						Measurable targets for widening participation of under-represented groups until 2020	Measurable targets for widening participation of under-represented groups until 2020	Measurable targets for widening participation of under-represented groups until 2020	
								Adoption of strategy for 'Mobility for better learning'; Review national legislation to comply with the Lisbon Recognition Convention	
	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	→	
	1998	1999	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2010	2012
	Sorbonne Declaration	Bologna Declaration	Prague Communiqué	Berlin Communiqué	Bergen Communiqué	London Communiqué	Leuven Communiqué	Budapest-Vienna Declaration	Bucharest Communiqué

Figure 1. Goals of the BP.

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Note

1. On LA: Ferrer 2010, Verger and Hermo 2010; on Asia-Pacific: Chao 2011, de Prado Yepes 2007; on USA and Australia: Robertson and Keeling 2008, Robertson 2010.

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