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The voice of inclusion in the midst of neoliberalist noise in the Bologna Process

Iryna Kushnir iD
Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract
This article belongs to a limited body of scholarship concerning inclusion in the Bologna Process. The Bologna Process aims to create the European Higher Education Area with comparable higher education structures within the European Higher Education Area member states. Unlike previous research that focuses on the implementation of one of the Bologna Process inclusion-related action lines (i.e. lifelong learning, student-centred education and social dimension), this article adopts a broader lens, and investigates the evolution of the meaning of 'inclusion' in the key international Bologna Process policy documents. This article argues that there is still a lack of clarity around the meaning of 'inclusion' in the Bologna Process, and the list of underprivileged groups that the Bologna Process aims to include in higher education, is absent. This article calls for an urgent review of this problem in the Bologna Process at the European Higher Education Area ministerial conference scheduled for 2020 which will set the agenda for post-2020 work in the European Higher Education Area.

Introduction

In this article, I explore the definition of 'inclusion' in the Bologna Process (BP) key international policy documents. The BP, which is an international project, aims to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) with comparable higher education structures to provide opportunities for academic and job mobility and cultural exchange. The BP was initiated in 1998 by only four countries – the UK, Germany, Italy and France – but it has grown territorially. It currently involves 48 countries (all of the European Union and some neighbouring states).

Corresponding author:
Iryna Kushnir, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield, Northumberland Rd, Elmfield, Sheffield, S10 2TU, UK.
Email: iryna.kushnir@ntu.ac.uk

The BP is the largest higher education initiative in the world which encompasses major developments in higher education (Vögtle and Martens, 2014). Including marginalised groups in higher education is one of the aims of the BP; however, the scholarship that researches this area of the BP is limited. Unlike previous research which has focused on the implementation of one of the BP inclusion-related action lines – that is, lifelong learning (Han, 2017), student-centred education (Sin, 2017) and social dimension (Jungblut, 2017) – this article adopts a broader lens and reports the findings of the posed research question: *How did the definition of 'inclusion' develop in the key international policy documents of the Bologna project which operates in the neoliberal context and advocates the ideas of social justice?* This study attempts to address this research question through the analysis of international policy documents on the EHEA website. Herein reported are the study design, findings and an explanation of how this study contributes to two bodies of literature concerning the BP and a wider literature on inclusion in higher education.

This article is structured by setting out a theoretical framework for the analysis of policy documents by looking at the relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion. This is followed by a further review of the literature explaining the neoliberal nature of the BP as well as the literature that investigates inclusion-related action lines in the BP. Then, following the discussion of the methodological approach in collecting and analysing policy documents, the article discusses the findings of this research and provides a conclusion.

Neoliberalism and inclusion: conflicting or mutually constitutive powers

Neoliberalism and inclusion are usually presented in the literature as conflicting powers – drivers and shaping factors of higher education. The title of Liasidou and Symeou's (2018) article provides an excellent illustration of this: 'Neoliberal versus social justice reforms in education policy and practice: discourses, politics and disability rights in education'. These scholars conclude that neoliberal imperatives force out the discourse about social justice from education policy. A plethora of other scholars echo this argument in their work. They state that neoliberalism makes it difficult for inclusive policies to stand because they do not promote individual competition which is the prerogative of neoliberalism (Cameron and Billington, 2017; Hardy and Woodcock, 2015; Mladenov, 2015). This could be illustrated by Hardy and Woodcock's (2015: 159) argument that 'neoliberal conditions which would seek to limit concerns about issues of inclusion (are) not seen to contribute to increase economic competitiveness'. Furthermore, those discourses about inclusion that do stand their ground get shaped by neoliberalism and get transformed, following the absorption of some neoliberalist spirit. For instance, the higher education setting in the UK formally provides an inclusive environment for dyslexic students; however, in practice, these students 'have to just deal with it' (Cameron and Billington, 2017: 1358).

The remainder of this section builds a theoretical framework for the analysis of the empirical findings by highlighting a potential different type of relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion – not as mutually exclusive powers. Inclusion and neoliberalism in education are explained separately; first, in order to capture the prevalent focus of prior relevant research on presenting these two powers as separate. I then show how they could be viewed as closely related powers. Although the initial separation of inclusion and neoliberalism below is prompted by the literature, it could be viewed as partially a theoretical distinction within. This distinction is scrutinised and questioned to suggest a close link between the two powers that are intertwined in their work in the area of higher education.

Inclusion in education

The conceptual challenges in developing a systematised approach to negotiating inclusion in education highlight the complexity of inclusion in education. This area is discussed in scholarly literature from a variety of angles: the relationship with other concepts; the issue of marginalised groups in education; policy-making and the geopolitics of inclusion in education.

The definition of 'inclusion'. The term 'inclusion' is related to the terms 'integration', 'participation', 'recognition', 'diversity' and 'social justice'. Bossaert et al. (2011) point out that the concepts of 'inclusion' 'integration' and 'participation' are used in the literature synonymously and refer to the same key themes around the perceptions and feelings of being accepted, quality interactions, etc. Bossaert et al. (2011: 60) as well as Koster et al. (2009: 117) refer to this as 'the social dimension of inclusion in education' which is about the recognition of diversity and its acceptance. Other scholars look in more detail at the relationship between diversity and social justice and see them as related and mutually reinforcing phenomena. More specifically, experiencing diversity in education facilitates the development of positive attitudes to diversity and results in more social justice, which in turn helps create ground for more diversity (Adams and Bell, 2016; Peppin Vaughan, 2016).

This is, of course, a process with many obstacles, one of which is the discrepancy between the formality of being included and the feeling in practice of being excluded. Hilt (2015: 165) maintains that there is a paradox in documents about education inclusion, as illustrated by the case of minority language pupils in schools: they 'are being included as excluded as well as excluded as included in the documents, displaying how inclusion and exclusion are two sides of the same coin'. Gewirtz's (2006) analysis of the multi-dimensional nature of social justice in education (discussion of the interrelatedness of the terms of inclusion and social justice (*vide infra*)) is helpful here as it further explains that often inclusion practices go hand in hand with exclusion practices – for instance, in order to help an underprivileged group they are often first labelled as such, and the act of labelling is unjust in its own nature.

The common ground shared by all the terms discussed above is a focus on the group(s) that need support. This is also the case when we look at the concepts of 'inclusion' and 'social justice' in education, despite the existence of two perspectives on this relationship. On one hand, a number of studies suggest that social justice and inclusion are two separate but, at the same time, related processes. In particular, Hodge (2017: 112) states that '(i)nclusion and social justice are about belonging in the world unfettered by the disablements of poverty, illness and prejudice. They are dependent upon interdependence, community and collaborative enterprise.' Furthermore, inclusion here is seen as a narrower phenomenon than social justice. Hodkinson (2010: 63) states: 'Interestingly, it is becoming apparent that inclusion is being conceptualised as relating solely to children with special educational needs and the relationships these individuals have with mainstream schools.' On the other hand, the scholar criticizes such a narrow conceptualisation of inclusion, accusing it of being fragmented and devaluing a broader meaning of inclusion. He argues for a more encompassing perspective on what inclusion is: 'It is my view that inclusion must be a broad church with solid foundations . . . Inclusion from this perspective would relate to special needs as well as to gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, age, culture and social class' (Hodkinson, 2010: 63). This way of defining inclusion resonates with a few other authors in the field of inclusion in education. For instance, Booth and Ainscow (1998: 54) maintain that '(i)nclusion and exclusion are as much about participation and marginalisation in relation to race, gender, sexuality, poverty and unemployment as they are about traditional special education concerns'. Such a broad way of looking at inclusion

in education addresses the same issue as social justice – overcoming the marginalisation of different groups of people. For instance, Bell and Adams (2016: 21) state:

> Social justice is both a goal and a process. The goal of social justice is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. The process for attaining the goal of social justice should also be democratic and participatory, respectful of human diversity and group differences, and inclusive and affirming of human agency and capacity for working collaboratively with others to create change.

Some scholars such as Opotow (2018) use the terms 'inclusion' and 'social justice' synonymously. This article adopts the same approach particularly because the policy documents that were used for the empirical part of this research seem to aspire to the social dimension of inclusion in education and focus on the broad picture of it – overcoming the marginalisation of different underprivileged groups. While it may seem that the methodological and theoretical approach here determines the research results, it is only partially true. Indeed, the research standpoint determines what is seen during and in the results of the research (Anfara and Mertz, 2014). While this is the case in this study as well, the findings should not be seen as an artefact. The decision to treat the terms 'social justice' and 'inclusion' as synonyms reflects the fact that many definitions of both terms in the literature share the same foundation. The choice to link the definition of these terms to overcoming the marginalisation of underprivileged groups was also informed by explicit references to the idea of underprivileged groups in the documents selected for this study.

The issue of marginalised groups in education. A lot of studies have explored inclusion in education from the perspective of who needs it. Studies on the inclusion of marginalised groups in education are numerous, particularly in the area of pre-tertiary education. The following marginalised groups are discussed: children with special education needs (SEN) (Shaw, 2017), race and ethnic minorities (Curcic et al., 2014), immigrants (Cropley, 2017), religious minorities (Mirza and Meetoo, 2018), girls, particularly in developing countries, (Harper et al., 2018), the LGBTQIA community (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-gender/sexual, queer, intersex and asexual people) (White et al., 2018) and children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Riessman and Miller, 2017).

Literature on tertiary education echoes the foci on the types of marginalised groups present in the literature on pre-tertiary education. However, it places more emphasis on the transition of people from lower social classes, different gender identities and older age groups to higher education and their participation in higher education. Recent policies for widening access to higher education for those who struggle financially in many developed countries, as well as some developing countries, have been a breakthrough in supporting the working class (Hunt, 2016). However, a range of challenges remain, such as many working-class representatives feeling they do not 'fit in' in higher education (Hazelkorn, 2015). Gender inequality in higher education has also attracted a lot of attention in research, particularly the topics of hegemonic masculinity in universities (Scoats, 2017), a gender gap in attainment (Van Bavel et al., 2018) and the needs of LGBTQIA students (Mobley and Johnson, 2015). Another important focus of the literature about inclusion in tertiary education is on the problems of access and participation of mature students (Guan and Ploner, 2020; Parr, 2019; Saddler and Sundin, 2020). These studies also discuss the situation in different countries. They also tend to highlight the intersection of the mature student's age and other challenging aspects of a student's identity that contribute to the marginalisation of mature students. While social classes, gender and age are clear foci in the literature about inclusion in higher education, SEN is a more silenced area here, as compared to the literature on pre-tertiary education. Those limited studies focus mainly on the challenges of including students with autism spectrum

disorder (Casement et al., 2017), physical disabilities (Evans, 2017) and specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia (Cameron and Billington, 2017). Clearly, access is not the only determinant of inclusion in these studies, as overcoming the challenges of marginalisation during student education is also important.

Policy-making and the geopolitics of inclusion in education. The focus on marginalised groups in education has been promoted globally by UNESCO since the issue of its *Education 2030 Incheon Declaration and framework for action* in 2015, which compiled the following list of these groups:

> *All people, irrespective of* sex, age, race, colour, ethnicity, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property or birth, as well as persons with disabilities, migrants, indigenous peoples, and children and youth, especially those in vulnerable situations or other status (UNESCO et al., 2015: 25).

It is also acknowledged in the *Declaration* that 'the list . . . is not exhaustive and that countries and regions may identify and address other status-based vulnerability, marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion in education' (UNESCO et al., 2015: 25).

A degree of convergence in the work of different countries towards the achievement of the goal mentioned above should be recognised. This is due to the references to both developed and developing countries in the discussion of marginalised groups in education in general, as well as specifically in tertiary education, such as the issue of class analysed by Hunt (2016). However, a great extent of national variation in this area should be acknowledged due to countries' different economic and ideological standpoint. For instance, adults with disabilities have different opportunities with regard to education in low-income and middle-income countries (Hosseinpoor et al., 2016). In addition to the focus on specific marginalised groups, there are other dimensions of the work of countries in the area of inclusion in education, such as online education provision for their student population or teacher education for inclusion. The goal to develop online education in African countries acts as 'promises of access and inclusion' (Lelliott et al., 2000: 45). Teacher training for inclusive education in diverse international contexts poses many challenges but these challenges could be overcome by focusing on the essential areas of competence and values, such as 'sharing practices, challenging assumptions, questioning traditional teacher education programme designs' (Engelbrecht, 2013: 118).

The 48 countries that belong to the EHEA have been working on harmonising their higher education systems. While the main governing bodies of the EHEA and country representatives set the agenda for the signatory states to develop their higher education systems, the 'soft governance in the EHEA lets national policy-makers shape the expression of the Bologna Process agenda in their countries' (Kushnir, 2015: 12). This makes it fair to expect a degree of national variation in the implementation of the inclusion agenda of the EHEA. The room for variation could also depend on the degree of specificity of the international EHEA agenda and how it has developed over time. The answer to the research question posed by this article about the development of the definition of 'inclusion' could be used as a stepping stone for further policy implementation research.

Neoliberalism in education

The term 'neoliberalism' has been used a lot in different bodies of literature since 1980, yet it is often left undefined and thus has become an 'imprecise buzzword' (Thorsen, 2010: 188). It is not easy to define neoliberalism as it is a very broad phenomenon characterising different stages of the development of economic and social systems. They may, arguably, vary from time to time and

place to place. However, it is important to establish a reference point for understanding what exactly neoliberalism entails. Davies and Bansel (2007) challenge the assumption that the meaning of neoliberalism is self-explanatory by providing the following definition. According to these scholars, neoliberalism is

> the transformation of the administrative state, one previously responsible for human well-being, as well as for the economy, into a state that gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges through which people are reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs of their own lives. We suggest it is primarily this reconfiguration of subjects as economic entrepreneurs, and of institutions capable of producing them, which is central to understanding the structuring of possible fields of action that has been taking place with the installation of neoliberal modes of governance (Davies and Bansel, 2007: 248).

This suggests that the development of neoliberalism brought about the reconfiguration of the identity of a citizen from a passive recipient of support to an active consumer and competitor.

The recent state of affairs in higher education resonates with the issues raised in the definition of neoliberalism above. Higher education policies in the neoliberal context 'anchor' neoliberalism through the work of experts (Ball, 2017: 29). A slowly but steadily diminishing role of the state in the neoliberalism era in general, which is emphasised by Thorsen (2010), is echoed in higher education policy-making (Ball, 2017). Universities have been transformed to produce such highly individualised and competitive graduates who have become 'entrepreneurial actors across all dimensions of their lives' (Brown, 2003: 38). For instance, Morrison (2017: 197) states that university students are now 'responsibilized consumers', and Kelly et al. (2017: 105) similarly argue that universities aim to produce students that correspond to 'the engaged student ideal'.

Ball (2015), who analyses the shift in governing of higher education, states that competitive self-ambitions are replacing collective interests and transforming them into commercial values. The scholar maintains that the all-devouring focus on benchmarks, tests and audits in higher education is undermining the professionalism of education practitioners at all levels of education; and the author calls for the need to reignite the focus on 'real educational work' which is about ethics and morals (Ball, 2015: 1046). In response, Evans (2018) recognises that some changes have already taken place, predominantly in the reshaping of European academic professionalism. The author argues that 'the neoliberal model is moribund. How imminent is its demise remains to be seen, but its days are certainly numbered' (Evans, 2018: 23). This statement is important for the analysis of the transformation of neoliberalism discourse in the EHEA later in the article. That analysis suggests that Evans (2018) quite rightly noticed the change but neoliberalism may, in fact, not be declining but rather undergoing transformations, whereby a more dialogical and accepting relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion discourses has started developing in the EHEA.

Inclusion and neoliberalism interlinked in education

Clearly, the literature presents neoliberalism and inclusion as a duality, as two powers that cannot reconcile and that work on exclusionary terms. The co-existence of the two is assumed but it is not a harmonious co-existence. This paper adopts a different perspective by recognising that neoliberalism and inclusion should not necessarily always be seen as pulling the education agenda in opposite directions.

My stance on this matter is perhaps closest to Cameron and Billington's (2017) suggestion that neoliberalism penetrates into the social justice discourse and neoliberalises it. I propose to advance this idea further and anticipate a more harmonious co-existence of the two, so to say, ideologies

– neoliberalism and inclusion – as one phenomenon, the name for which is yet to be found. This phenomenon may combine a mutually shaping relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion which reveals the neoliberalisation of inclusion as much as a growing inclusivity of neoliberalism.

The neo-institutionalist approach can offer an explanation of this phenomenon if the EHEA is viewed as an institution. Streeck and Thelen (2005), examining different theories of institutional change, explain that institutions are open systems that must interact with their environments and adapt in order to survive, and that institutional changes develop in incremental and cumulatively transformative processes. The growing mutually shaping relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion in the EHEA documents may be a result of such incremental combination of the two in the context of the globally developing trend of neoliberalism (Ball, 2017) and the discourse of social justice promoted universally (Peppin Vaughan, 2016).

The question would still remain in terms of how education policy may be affected in the context of a mutually shaping relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion. Prunty (1985: 138) maintains that

> it is important for the policy analyst to recognise the difference between symbolic and material policies. Indeed, the former type dovetails snugly with the critical theorist's concern about symbolic forms of domination. Assuming that a just and equitable policy statement is produced in the policy process, this in itself is no assurance that material change will occur.

The distinction between material and symbolic policies has remained a useful analytical tool in policy analysis up to now. For instance, Hardy and Woodcock (2015) apply it to their research and detail the meaning of these two types of policies. According to the authors, symbolic policies are broad, vague and ambiguous with few resources at their disposal and lack a precise plan for implementation. The other type includes material, or substantive, policies which, on the contrary, are more focused in terms of their meaning and goals with concrete strategies for implementation, and which ultimately target a return of investment. Whichever type of policy dominates in the age of neoliberalism is debatable. Hardy and Woodcock (2015) imply that material policies prevail in the neoliberal context of education, while Rizvi and Lingard (2009) explain that different types of policies are equally likely to be promoted in the globalising neoliberal education context, depending on the purpose which is pursued by policy-makers.

While the degrees of commitment to the practical implementation of material and symbolic policies differ, both types of policies may be related to 'a discursive ensemble'. This is the term Ball (2017) adopts to describe a set of interrelated concepts and arguments aimed to justify education reform. The starting point of such a discursive ensemble, according to the scholar, is a shortcoming in addressing certain issues by previous reforms. The neoliberal rhetoric is embedded in the elements of a discursive ensemble which are 'both local and specific as well as generic and global' (Ball, 2017: 37). Ball (2017) recognises that the elements of a discursive ensemble may convey a range of meanings. If neoliberalism and inclusion are seen as two sides of one coin, then both neoliberalism and inclusion may be seen as embedded in the elements of possibly one discursive ensemble of a policy. These elements formed the basis of the thematic analysis of policy documents for this study, which is explained in the methodology section.

Inclusion-related action lines in the neoliberalist BP

The EHEA is not an exception in the world of neoliberal policy-making in education. The literature on the EHEA echoes to a great extent the focus on neoliberalism in the wider education literature,

discussed above. A large body of literature on the BP mentions, in one way or another, that the BP is a neoliberalist endeavour (Antunes, 2012; Commisso, 2013; Damro and Friedman, 2018; Fejes, 2008; Hujak and Sik-Lanyi, 2017; Jayasuriya, 2010; Kašić, 2016; Lorenz, 2012; Lucas, 2019; Lundbye-Cone, 2018; Mitchell, 2006; Novoa, 2007; Pritchard, 2011; Tabulawa, 2009). Specifically, Lundbye-Cone (2018) mentions a 'neoliberal cholera' in EHEA policy-making (1022), with 'a neoliberal hegemony arching over the last two decades' (1020). Indeed, tuning education for the market (Antunes, 2012) and building a knowledge-based economy have been among the aims of the EHEA and 'buzzwords' in its policy-making, whereby knowledge is a key driver of economic development (Hujak and Sik-Lanyi, 2017). Damro and Friedman (2018) emphasise the importance of market factors through which the European Union influences policy actors in higher education, particularly in the EHEA. Academia is turning into a market altogether in the context of the BP as its nature is neoliberal (Cosar and Ergul, 2015). It is a new public management tool in higher education for promoting accountability, benchmarking, stocktaking and control. In this context, higher education is turning into a commodity for those who know the rules of the game and can either purchase it or access it in a different way and learn to take advantage of everything that is on offer while in education (Stech, 2011). The task of the EHEA is to prepare a new type of flexible highly skilled, self-programmable employee (Tabulawa, 2009), and 'efficiency, accountability, responsibility, autonomy, market, choice, customers' have become a 'hackneyed terminology' in the EHEA (Novoa, 2007: 145). Evidently, neoliberalism is integral to the nature of the BP and all areas of its work, including how it is organised.

The focus of this article is directed at the voice of inclusion in the neoliberalist EHEA. Thus, it is worth looking at the literature that evokes the theme of inclusion in the EHEA. There is a separate body of literature about the EHEA which explores the implementation of different action lines of the BP. It explicitly mentions three action lines as related to inclusion: lifelong learning, student-centred learning and social dimension. This literature also recognises the multi-faceted nature of inclusion and its place both in higher education and in a wider society.

The promotion of inclusion in higher education and society in general through lifelong learning is discussed by Kersh and Huegler (2018) and Schuetze and Slowey (2020). Student-centeredness of education is claimed by Sin (2015) to be as a promoting factor of inclusion. Powell and Finger (2013) call upon viewing social mobility, which should result from the BP social dimension, as a route to inclusion. The literature on the lifelong learning action line documents that it aims to ease access to higher education for people of all ages and education backgrounds by supporting the recognition of different forms of prior learning, including non-formal learning (Han, 2017). A few studies highlight the advantages of the implementation of this action line in the EHEA as it develops human capital (Šmídová et al., 2017) and facilitates upward social mobility (Marr and Butcher, 2018). Some studies such as the one by Lester (2018) problematise policy nuances in the process of the recognition of prior learning by explaining that there are different patterns of learning that take place outside formal institutions throughout the course of life, but which lead to the same outcomes in terms of higher education access.

Student-centred learning as opposed to a teacher-dominated transmission of knowledge to students is perhaps the least researched action line among the three inclusion-related action lines. Sin (2017) explores the manifestations of student-centred learning as a student empowerment tool across national and institutional settings in the case of physics master's degree curricula. Klemenčič (2017: 69) takes a different angle in their research and questions the meaning of this term. The author criticises 'the eclectic use of SCL (student-centred learning) in association with a broad variety of policy issues'. The author also questions the suitability of student engagement as a conceptual foundation of student-centred learning.

While the term 'student-centred learning' is often used as an umbrella term for multiple policy issues, according to Klemenčič (2017), the meaning of the term 'social dimension' is accused of being vague by Yagci (2014). The author states:

> The social dimension entered into the Bologna Process as an ambiguous action area in 2001 and has remained so in terms of its policy measures. Despite this ambiguity and lack of action, the social dimension has not dropped off the Bologna Process agenda . . . the social dimension is a policy item that found a way into the Bologna Process agenda, but could not grow into an implementable policy (509).

Holford (2014: 7) expresses a similar idea when talking about 'a lost honour of the Social Dimension'. The definition of social dimension is associated with widening access to people of different socio-economic status (Jungblut, 2017; Riddell and Weedon, 2014) and social mobility (Powell and Finger, 2013). Neugebauer et al. (2016: 51) question the ultimate outcome of this idea, arguing that the introduction of two cycles studies in the BP – bachelor's and master's – yields a 'new form of differentiation for social inequality' because very few students from poor and uneducated families progress from the first to the second cycle. Indeed, the meaning of social dimension seems to be somewhat similar to the meaning of lifelong learning. The latter is, arguably, also about widening access but lifelong learning does not place the emphasis on people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, unlike social dimension.

All these studies focus on one of the action lines, unlike the research presented in this article. Moreover, the literature about these inclusion-related action lines has not yet interrogated directly the overall definition of inclusion in the BP key international policy documents and the evolution of this definition, and has not analysed it in relation to neoliberalism. The design and findings of the study that addresses this gap are presented below.

Methodology

The gap in the literature highlighted above prompted the following research question: *How did the definition of 'inclusion' develop in the key international policy documents of the Bologna project which operates in the neoliberal context and advocates the ideas of social justice?* The answer to this question was sought through policy document searches on the EHEA website and qualitative thematic analysis of these documents. The data collection and analysis were conducted between June and August 2018.

Eighteen key documents, issued between 1998 and 2018, were collected (see Appendix). All declarations and communiqués (nine in total) resulting from the EHEA ministerial conferences were collected because these documents presented the results of stocktaking of the achievements of the EHEA and an outline of further goals. Each of these documents was supplemented by a relevant work programme or plan (nine in total) to see concrete steps that resulted from the goals outlined in the declarations and communiqués. Each of the declarations or communiqués, and their related work programme, or plan, belong to one of nine so-called periods of the development of the EHEA. These periods are identified for the purpose of analysis in this paper based on the time-frames in between each ministerial conference: 1998–2001, 2001–2003, 2003–2005, 2005–2007, 2007–2009, 2009–2012, 2012–2015, 2015–2018, 2018–2020. The years in these periods overlap because the ministerial conferences took place a number of months into a year, and thus work programmes or plans relate to overlapping years.

Manual thematic analysis of these documents consisted of two phases. Since the focus of this research is on the meaning of inclusion, the first phase of analysis was about identifying inclusion-related sections in the policy documents, obtaining the information relevant to the action lines of

the BP identified in the literature as related to inclusion: lifelong learning (e.g. Han, 2017), student-centred education (e.g. Sin, 2017) and social dimension (e.g. Jungblut, 2017). The second and bigger phase of the thematic analysis was guided by the theoretical framework constructed for this research – focusing on the dialogue between the discourse of inclusion and that of neoliberalism in the inclusion-related action lines. This analysis was conducted chronologically following the stages of the development of the BP. This phase of the analysis followed Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guide for open and axial coding. Open coding entailed breaking down the data in the documents into categories and sub-categories, or, in other words, themes and sub-themes, while being open to different insights. The open coding was done around the elements of the 'discursive ensemble' of the three action lines in the BP documents that was expected to have embedded both neoliberalism and inclusion discursive elements. Examples of the inclusion-related discursive elements that were considered include 'social justice', 'inclusion', 'support' and 'cooperation' (Hodkinson, 2010) as well as the social justice categories identified by Booth and Ainscow (1998) and Hodkinson (2010), such as 'race', 'ethnicity', 'culture', 'gender', 'age', 'sexuality', 'social class' and 'special education needs'. Open coding for the neoliberalist discursive elements was focused around such common neoliberalist terminology identified by Ball (2017) as 'competition', 'excellence' and 'performance'. The categories and sub-categories from the open coding were regrouped in the axial coding, consequently highlighting the nature of the relationship between the social justice and neoliberal discursive elements within the information about the inclusion-related action lines of the BP, and the evolution of this relationship since 1998. These categories and sub-categories with relevant quotes were recorded on 34 pages of a Word document.

It is worth clarifying the semantics of 'meaning' and 'definition' as these terms are key to my research question and the discussion that follows. We can talk about a meaning of a definition, different definitions conveying a meaning, or a meaning and definition as interchangeable concepts (Geeraerts, 2003). For the purpose of this article, the 'meaning' of inclusion is seen as a broader concept that derives from multiple pointers with regard to the definition of inclusion as presented in the Bologna documents.

The meaning of 'inclusion' in the BP documents

This section presents key findings from the thematic analysis about the meaning of 'inclusion' in the BP key policy documents. An explicit definition of inclusion is missing in the BP policy documents. Understanding 'inclusion' in the BP, in terms of the three action lines (lifelong learning, student-centred education and social dimension), as previous research implies, has pitfalls when applying it to making sense of the key policy documents in the BP. Inclusion is presented as a tight interrelationship with neoliberalist discourse, and thus, a more productive way of understanding inclusion as it is presented in the BP documents may be through considering that inclusion and neoliberalism may be two sides of the same coin. This metaphor is used to highlight how closely related inclusion and neoliberalism appear to be here, and not to suggest that symmetry exists between these two concepts. The relationship between inclusion and neoliberalist discourses in the BP has been evolving in the relevant policy texts since the commencement of the BP in 1998. However, the definition of inclusion remains vague in the documents, as it is still unclear what specific underprivileged groups are meant to be included in the BP.

The meaning of 'inclusion' not confined by the BP action lines

Understanding 'inclusion' in terms of the three action lines (lifelong learning, student-centred education and social dimension), as implicitly suggested in the literature presented earlier, has pitfalls

because of the overlaps among these action lines and, consequently, unclear relationships amongst them. This part of the main argument of this article adds to the fragmented account of a similar idea in the literature. Vagueness in the meaning of the inclusion-related social dimension action line is highlighted by Holford (2014) and Yagci (2014). In addition, Klemenčič (2017) emphasises an eclectic use of the idea of student-centred learning in the relevant action line.

Unlike these studies that are focused on single BP action lines, this research analyses all inclusion-related action lines and highlights inconsistencies in presenting the relationships among these action lines in policy documents. They are often presented as separate priorities of equal value. This can be illustrated by how they are listed as headings for the sections that discuss separate action lines for the future in the Leuven (Appendix, EHEA, 2009) declaration: 'Social dimension: equitable access and completion' (2), 'Lifelong learning' (3) and 'Student-centred learning and the teaching mission of higher education' (3). However, a different relationship among these action lines is sometimes presented in the BP documents. For instance, 'social dimension' is used as a collective term for other action lines, including lifelong learning in the work plan 2012–2015 (Appendix, Bologna Follow Up Group, 2013: 17): 'Support the development of national access policies by elaborating core indicators that may be used for measuring and monitoring the relevant aspects of the social dimension in higher education, including lifelong learning.'

So the meaning of 'inclusion' in the BP should not be confined to the three inclusion-related action lines in the BP because there are overlaps between these action lines, and they are not always discussed in the documents as action lines 'of the same level', even though they are presented as such in other places in the documents. There are other aspects of how the definition of 'inclusion' is presented in the BP and they are important to investigate to understand the state of the arts of the issues of the meaning of 'inclusion' in the BP.

Connection between inclusion and neoliberalism in the BP

The idea that neoliberalist discourse may penetrate the inclusion discourse in education is suggested by Cameron and Billington (2017). My research evidences this in the case of the BP inclusion-related action lines. It is illustrated with the help of the underlined parts of the following quotations from policy documents in relation to each of the BP inclusion-related action lines – lifelong learning, social dimension and student-centred learning, respectively:

> **(L)ifelong learning** learning strategies are necessary to face the challenges of competitiveness (neoliberalist discourse) and the use of new technologies and to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities (inclusion discourse) (Appendix, EHEA, 2001: 2; my emphasis).

> Ministers reaffirm the importance of **the social dimension** of the Bologna Process. The need to increase competitiveness (neoliberalist discourse) must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities (inclusion discourse) (Appendix, EHEA, 2003: 1; my emphasis).

> **Student-centred learning** and mobility will help students develop the competences they need in a changing labour market (neoliberalist discourse) . . . We call upon all actors involved. . . to foster student-centred learning as a way of empowering the learner in all forms of education, providing the best solution for sustainable and flexible learning paths (inclusion discourse) (Appendix, EHEA, 2009: 1–2: my emphasis).

    While previous research reveals that neoliberalism plays a great role in the work of the EHEA (Lundbye-Cone, 2018), this study demonstrates that there is an intertwined relationship between inclusion and neoliberalist discourse in the discussion of the three inclusion-related action lines of the BP. It is impossible to understand the meaning of inclusion without considering this intertwined relationship between inclusion and neoliberalism.

Evolving meaning of inclusion in its tight relationship with neoliberalism

The relationship between inclusion and neoliberalism in the three inclusion-related action lines has not been static. It has been evolving in the BP key policy documents, and it is important to review this to explain the dynamic nature of the meaning of 'inclusion'. The thematic analysis of policy documents suggests that the following three phases in this evolving relationship could be distinguished: 1998–2005, 2005–2012 and 2012–2020. The years overlap in these phases for the same reason as the periods of the development of the EHEA mentioned earlier in this article – because policy documents are issued a number of months into a year, which marks the end of the period covered by the previous documents and starts a new period. The content of the neoliberalist discourse focused on the development of individual competitiveness and economic potential of the EHEA, which remained the same throughout these phases. So did the strengths of this discourse – the frequency of the occurrence of the language related to this content. What changed was the strengths and content of the inclusion discourse.

    The first phase in the evolving relationship of inclusion and neoliberalism (1998–2005) is characterised by relatively equal strengths of the inclusion and neoliberalist discourses in the declarations and communiqués and their corresponding plans and programmes. This was judged on the basis of the occurrence of inclusive or neoliberalist language in the policy documents with reference to the three inclusion-related action lines. The context of the inclusion discourse in this phase was focused predominantly on access to higher education and the participation in it:

> Promotion of (academic and job) mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to . . . access to training and training opportunities and to related service (Appendix, EHEA, 1999: 3).

> Ministers affirmed that students should participate in and influence the organisation and content of education at universities and other higher education institutions (Appendix, EHEA, 2001: 3).

    The people for whom this access and participation was facilitated were from diverse cultural and language backgrounds with different aspirations and abilities (Appendix, EHEA, 1999, 2001). Higher education 'for all citizens', as a term, first became used in 2003 (Appendix, EHEA, 2003: 1). This term continued to be used in subsequent phases. For instance, this phrase is used in the document from the second phase (2005–2015) – 'higher education equally accessible to all' (Appendix, EHEA, 2005: 4).

    The second phase in the evolving relationship of inclusion and neoliberalism (2005–2012) is characterised by the strengthening of the inclusion discourse, while the neoliberalist discourse remained relatively consistent. The strengthening here is referred to the number of times inclusion language is used in the documents in addition to the neoliberalist discourse. This could also be interpreted as a transformation of the inclusion discourse in a way that allowed it to develop a more reconciled relationship with the powerful neoliberalist discourse. The content of the inclusive discourse became enriched in this phase because of the additional strong focus on the transition to the

labour market even though employability was mentioned briefly in the documents of the previous phase as well (e.g. Appendix, Allegre et al., 1998). In addition, a stronger focus on continuous professional development for all citizens also developed:

> The European Higher Education Area is structured around three cycles, where each level has the function of preparing the student for the labour market, for further competence building and for active citizenship (Appendix, EHEA, 2005: 6).

> Areas to be covered in the report will include . . . the role of higher education in lifelong learning and continuing professional development (Appendix Bologna Follow Up Group, 2008: 6).

The third phase in the evolving relationship of inclusion and neoliberalism covers the timeframe of 2015–2020. The cut-off point for this phase is in 2020 because the next EHEA ministerial conference is scheduled for the end of 2020 (EHEA, 2018), and most recent BP documents are issued with this deadline in mind (e.g. Appendix, EHEA, 2018). This phase of the development of the relationship between inclusion and neoliberalism in the EHEA is characterised by a further transformation of the inclusion discourse that allowed for even more inclusion-related language while the neoliberalist discourse still remained consistent. In this phase, the content of the inclusive discourse became enriched by the emergence of explicit references for the first time in the documents to the term 'inclusion' and its derivatives, denoting the support for marginalised groups in education which would consequently help build an inclusive society:

> Making our systems more inclusive is an essential aim for the EHEA as our populations become more and more diversified (Appendix, EHEA, 2015: 2).

> We therefore commit to developing new and inclusive approaches for continuous enhancement of learning and teaching across the EHEA (Appendix, EHEA, 2018: 3).

Clearly, the meaning of inclusion was evolving in its relationship with neoliberalism. Interestingly, the strengthening of the inclusion discourse did not mean the diminishing of neoliberalist discourse. It meant its transformation. Thus, Evans (2018: 23) expected the 'demise of neoliberalism' in the near future; however, this may well not be the death of neoliberalism but rather its transformation, whereby it has developed in such a way that it can integrate with the social justice agenda. The social justice agenda has transformed itself to have a more reconciled relationship with the neoliberalist discourse. Thus, we may be witnessing a transformation from the vision of an all-devouring neoliberalism, which pushes social justice away, prevalent in the prior literature on the topic.

This evolving relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion seems to be illustrative of what Streeck and Thelen (2005) postulate as an incremental and gradually transformative institutional change process. The growing mutually shaping relationship between neoliberalism and inclusion in the EHEA documents may be as a result of such an incremental combination of the two, whereby we are witnessing a productive combination of neoliberalism and inclusion in the neoliberalisation of inclusion, as much as a growing inclusivity of neoliberalism.

Remaining gaps in the definition of 'inclusion'

Up to now we have learned that understanding the meaning of inclusion in the BP with reference only to the content of the three action lines is not enough. We should also consider the tight

mutually shaping relationship between inclusion and neoliberalist discourse in these action lines. This relationship has been dynamic, with the inclusion discourse strengthening its position in this relationship over time. While all this is essential in our understanding of the meaning of inclusion in the BP, this is still not an exhaustive account as there are a few gaps in the definition of 'inclusion'.

An explicit definition of inclusion is missing in the BP documents but this is not a revelation in itself as this is the reason why this research has been conducted – to find out what inclusion means in the BP. There are gaps remaining in the definition of inclusion because the key term – 'under-represented groups' or its synonyms – that are used with the reference to inclusion are never explained in the BP policy documents, except for the only example – people from lower socio-economic backgrounds: 'social and economic background should not be a barrier to access to higher education, successful completion of studies and meaningful employment after graduation' (Appendix, Bologna Follow Up Group, 2005b: 21).

Other than that, the term 'underrepresented groups' is usually used without further explicit explanation of its meaning. For instance

> Access into higher education should be widened by fostering the potential of students from underrepresented groups and by providing adequate conditions for the completion of their studies. This involves improving the learning environment, removing all barriers to study, and creating the appropriate economic conditions for students to be able to benefit from the study opportunities at all levels. Each participating country will set measurable targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade. Efforts to achieve equity in higher education should be complemented by actions in other parts of the educational system (Appendix, EHEA, 2009: 2).

One may expect at least some indication in this lengthy quotation of who exactly belongs to the underrepresented groups but it is not provided. This is the case in many other documents where this term is used (e.g. Appendix, Bologna Follow Up Group, 2013; EHEA, 2010). There are, however, documents where some clues of the areas that are linked to the underrepresented groups are provided:

> We will support higher education institutions in enhancing their efforts to promote intercultural understanding, critical thinking, political and religious tolerance, gender equality, and democratic and civic values, in order to strengthen European and global citizenship and lay the foundations for inclusive societies (Appendix, EHEA, 2015: 1–2).

It can only be speculated that the 'intercultural understanding' aims to promote the inclusion of ethnic minorities and speakers of different languages; that the 'political and religious tolerance' aims to promote the inclusion of religious minorities; and that the 'gender equality' relates to the inclusion of women and the LGBTQIA community. The next quotation similarly highlights two other areas that may inform our understanding of other types of the underrepresented groups that inclusion in the BP targets. The emphasis below on abilities may be linked to the inclusion of students with special education needs, and the lifelong learning action line may be linked to the inclusion of people of different ages into education, even though, as it was explained earlier, the focus of this action line is on the recognition of prior learning rather than on the age of those who engaged in this prior learning: '*They stress the need to improve opportunities for all citizens, in accordance with their aspirations and abilities, to follow the lifelong learning paths into and within higher education*' (Appendix, EHEA, 2003: 6).

Based on the distinction between symbolic and material policies by Prunty (1985) and Rizvi and Lingard (2009) presented earlier in the article, inclusion in the BP dovetails with symbolic policies more than with material policies. According to the scholars, symbolic policies tend to be broad and vague with few resources at their disposal and with a lack of a precise plan for implementation. Indeed, whom exactly this inclusion targets is ambiguous. It still remains unclear who exactly the target audiences of the 'discursive ensemble' of the inclusion-related action lines are, in Ball's (2017) terms. A degree of vagueness in another Bologna action line – the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation Scheme (ECTS) which is the credit system to measure student workload – is mentioned by Kushnir (2017). The author states that the action line as presented in the international Bologna documents is broad and offers a set of concrete pointers – the definition of the credit, its weight, etc. – which the signature country examined in the study developed and implemented in its own unique way. Kushnir (2017) does not discuss the neoliberal and inclusion aspects of that action line. However, the author suggests that the Bologna action lines might have been intentionally designed in the international documents to combine symbolic and material features of policies. This might have been done to allow for these policies to be materialised fully as they are implemented by the signatory states. However, the vagueness of the inclusion-related lines seems to serve a slightly different political function in the neoliberalist EHEA as the action lines lack any comprehensive list of pointers for their comparable operationalisation in the EHEA countries. Some progress has been made to support people from lower socio-economic backgrounds by creating funding opportunities for academic mobility and flexible learning paths for those who need them (Lundbye-Cone, 2018). Any concrete all-encompassing plan for the transition of these action lines from the realm of symbolic policies on the international level to the realm of material policies on the national level is missing. The implementation of the inclusion of the underprivileged groups is unfeasible since the groups are not defined and the list of groups is absent. Rizvi and Lingard (2009) explain that symbolic policies are likely to be promoted in the globalising neoliberal education. Evidently, the inclusion-related action lines are promoted largely as symbolic policies in the neoliberalist EHEA through the Bologna international documents.

This is not to say that everyone who has been involved in the BP has been working without a well-defined aim. The BP is much broader than the three inclusion-related action lines and the meaning of inclusion in general. A lot of progress has been made in other areas – facilitating student and staff academic mobility (Vögtle and Martens, 2014), harmonising study cycles and other elements of degree structures in higher education systems in the EHEA (Kushnir, 2019). These policies are evidently material.

Conclusion

This study has explored the meaning of inclusion in the BP. The study has revealed that understanding 'inclusion' in terms of the three action lines (lifelong learning, student-centred education and social dimension) has pitfalls because of the overlaps among these action lines and, consequently, unclear relationships amongst them. A more productive way of understanding inclusion in the BP may be through considering a tight relationship between the inclusion and neoliberalist discourses. This relationship has not been static – it has been evolving in the relevant policy texts since the commencement of the BP in 1998. The inclusion discourse grew in strength, while the neoliberal rhetoric firmly stood its ground since the beginning of the BP. Despite this seemingly positive dynamic in the development of inclusion in the BP, its definition remains vague in the policy documents. It is still unclear exactly which underprivileged groups are meant to be included.

Prunty (1985: 138) states that 'the role of the critical policy analyst must also include the activity of policy monitoring and evaluation if there is to be any hope of rhetoric becoming reality'.

There is hope as some small steps have been taken, such as supporting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This has probably happened because this underprivileged group is addressed explicitly in the policy documents. The next step is to identify the rest of the groups clearly, and set up a concrete agenda for their inclusion in higher education in the EHEA. This would make inclusive policy-making in the BP material, in Prunty's (1985) terms. The EHEA ministerial conference scheduled for the end of 2020 should become the platform to do this. This matter is urgent and worrying as 2020 is supposed to be the deadline for achieving a fully functioning EHEA (EHEA, 2018a). The international ministerial conference in 2020 is an opportunity to set an amended agenda and deadline, particularly with regard to inclusion in the BP.

Author's note

Iryna Kushnir is now affiliated with Nottingham Institute of Education, Nottingham Trent University, UK.

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ORCID iD

Iryna Kushnir https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0727-7208

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Author biography

Iryna Kushnir, Dr., is currently a senior lecturer in education studies at Nottingham Trent University. She previously worked at the University of Sheffield and University of Edinburgh. Her interdisciplinary research combines the following main areas: higher education, education policy, post-Soviet Europeanisation and migration. Her interdisciplinary approach has led to empirical and theoretical contributions, which reveal how education policy on one hand and Europeanisation processes and post-Soviet transition on the other hand are interrelated and mutually shape one another.

Appendix. Policy documents

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