# Chapter 2. A growing voice of inclusion in the neoliberal context: the international policy-making level of the Bologna Process

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*Abstract*

*This chapter conceptualises inclusion and neoliberalism and theorises the relationship between these two phenomena in order to contextualise the debates presented in the rest of the chapters in this book. Additionally, this chapter investigates the evolution of the meaning of 'inclusion' in the key international Bologna Process policy documents. This chapter is informed by a thematic analysis of 26 documents, issued between 1998 and 2020. The chapter demonstrates that understanding 'inclusion' only with regard to lifelong learning, student-centred education and the social dimension has pitfalls – there are overlaps between these action lines and, consequently, the relationships among them are unclear. A better way of understanding inclusion in Bologna may be through considering a tight relationship between the inclusion and neoliberal discourses in the support of marginalised groups in higher education. The relationship has been evolving in relevant policy documents since 1998 which is the year that marks the preparatory Sorbonne meeting that gave life to Bologna in 1999. The inclusion discourse grew in strengths, while the neoliberal rhetoric firmly stood its ground since the beginning of the Bologna Process, while undergoing some transformations. In spite of such seemingly positive dynamic in the development of inclusion in the Bologna Process, its definition remained vague in the policy documents until 2020 as it was unclear which exact underprivileged groups were meant to be supported in the European Higher Education Area. The 2020 conference outcome documents made a significant step towards closing the gaps in our understanding of whom inclusion targets in Bologna and how to implement these inclusion ideas. The chapter highlights this achievement and also prepares the reader to problematise its reach in national contexts later in the book.*

*Key words:* Bologna Process, European Higher Education Area, inclusion, social justice, neoliberalism.

# 1. Introduction

This chapter is developed on the basis of my previous article (Kushnir, 2020), extending the scope of its methodological approach and adding new and important findings. This chapter explores the evolution of the meaning of inclusion in the neoliberal context of the Bologna Process (BP), or in other words, Bologna. While supporting marginalised groups in higher education (HE) is one of the aims of the Bologna Process, the literature about this is limited. Unlike previous studies that focused on the implementation of one of Bologna inclusion-related action lines – lifelong learning (Han, 2017), student-centred education (Sin, 2017) and social dimension (Jungblut, 2017) – this chapter adopts a broader lens by investigating inclusion in Bologna more widely. It reports the findings of the research which aimed to answer the following 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 inclusion? This chapter provides an answer to this question through the analysis of international policy documents on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) website, issued between 1998 and 2020. The study, reported in this chapter, makes a major contribution to two bodies of literature – concerning the BP and a wider literature on inclusion in higher education.

Neoliberalism and inclusion are usually presented in the scholarship as conflicting powers that shape higher education. The title of Hooley et al's book (2017) 'Career Guidance for Social Justice: Contesting Neoliberalism' provides an excellent illustration of the idea of a mutually exclusive nature of social justice and neoliberalism – the promotion of social justice automatically triggers the contestation of neoliberalism. The title of Liasidou and Symeou's (2018) article also encapsulates the idea of a confrontation between the two powers: 'Neoliberal versus social justice reforms in education policy and practice: discourses, politics and disability rights in education'. These authors maintain that the discourse of social justice is forced out from education policy by neoliberal imperatives.

Other scholars reverberate this idea, explaining that neoliberalism causes complications for the existence of inclusive policies because they fail to promote individual competition which is the remit of neoliberalism (Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Mladenov, 2015; Cameron & Billington, 2017). This could be further illustrated by Hardy and Woodcock's (2015, p.159) statement: 'neoliberal conditions which would seek to limit concerns about issues of inclusion [are] not seen to contribute to increase economic competitiveness'. Moreover, the social justice discourses about inclusion that do survive get shaped and transformed by neoliberalism. For example, while the higher education context in the United Kingdom formally is meant to provide an inclusive environment for students with dyslexia, in practice, these students 'have to just deal with it' (Cameron & Billington, 2017, p.1358).

The remainder of the chapter sets out a theoretical framework for the analysis of the documents first by looking at how neoliberalism and inclusion are related. A review of the literature explaining the neoliberal nature of the BP as well as inclusion-related action lines in Bologna is presented next. After the explanation of the methodological approaches in this research, the chapter discusses the findings and provides a conclusion.

# 2. Neoliberalism and inclusion as mutually constitutive powers

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 concepts but as ideas in a state of tension. 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.

### *2.1. Inclusion in education*

The conceptual challenges in developing a systematised approach to defining inclusion in education highlight the complexity of inclusion in education. This area is discussed in relevant 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 term 'inclusion' is related to the terms 'integration', 'participation', 'recognition', 'diversity' and 'social justice'. Bossaert et al (2011) point out that the concepts 'inclusion' 'integration', 'participation' are used in the literature synonymously and refer to the same key themes around students' perceptions and feelings of being accepted and the quality of interactions with staff and students, which appears to be students' subjective understanding of inclusion (Bossaert et al., 2011, p.60). Koster et al (2009, p.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 & 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, p.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 is helpful here as it further explains that often inclusive practices go hand-in-hand with exclusive 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 'inclusion' and 'social justice' in education, despite the existence of two perspectives on this relationship. On the one hand, a number of studies imply that social justice and inclusion are two separate processes but, at the same time, related processes. In particular, Hodge (2017, p.112) uses both terms jointly, stating that 'Inclusion 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, p.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 criticises 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, p.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, p.54) maintain that 'Inclusion 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' (Booth & Ainscow, 1998). 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, p.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 chapter adopts the same approach which is echoed in the rest of the book. 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 international Bologna documents, as explained in more detail elsewhere.

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 & 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), children from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Riessman & Miller, 2017), indigenous peoples (Manton & Williams, 2021)

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' 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), gender gap in attainment (Van Bavel et al, 2018), and the needs of LGBTQIA students (Mobley & 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 & Ploner, 2020; Saddler & Sundin, 2020; Parr, 2019). These studies also discuss the situation in different countries. They also tend to highlight the intersection of the mature student age and other challenging aspects of a student's identity that contribute to the marginalisation of mature students. Alongside social classes, gender and age has clear foci in the literature about inclusion in higher education, the discussion about SEN has been gaining momentum too. Such studies focus, for example, 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 & 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. Students with impairments have featured in the Eurostudent surveys. For instance, survey IV 2016-2018 highlights the issues in light of the differences between countries (EuroStudent IV, 2018). The survey asks questions about level of support needed and if it is sufficient. The later surveys include more data on students by type of impairment.

The focus on marginalised groups in education has been actively 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, p.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, p.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 standpoints. For instance, adults with disabilities have different opportunities with regards 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 is often left at the stage of 'promises of access and inclusion' (Lelliott et al, 2000, p.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, p.118).

The 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, p.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.

### *2.2. Neoliberalism in education*

As explained in the introductory chapter, neoliberalism is about the promotion of free market systems and values as the best possible way of organizing economic and social affairs.

This involves competition between individuals and institutions for privileged status, and a minimal role for the state.

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, p.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, p.38). For instance, Morrison (2017, p.197) states that university students are now 'responsibilized consumers' which adds another layer to the new image of students, and Kelly et al (2017, p.105) similarly argue that universities aim to produce students that correspond to 'the engaged student ideal'.

Ball (2015), who analyses the shift in governance 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 on 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, p.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, p.23). Altbach and de Wit (2017) are less positive that neoliberalism in higher education is on its way out. In any case, this debate may indicate that neoliberalism may be undergoing transformations even if it is not dying yet. Perhaps, a more dialogical and reconciled relationship between inclusion and neoliberalism discourses has started emerging in the EHEA.

### *2.3. Inclusion and neoliberalism interlinked in education*

Clearly, the literature tends to present 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 chapter, and book overall, adopts a different perspective by recognising that neoliberalism and inclusion should not necessarily be always seen as pulling the education agenda in opposite directions.

My stance on this matter is perhaps the 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 neoinstitutionalist 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 international Bologna 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, p.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 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 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, p.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.

# 3. Inclusion-related action lines in the neoliberal 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 neoliberal endeavor (e.g., Mitchell, 2006; Novoa, 2007; Fejes, 2008; Tabulawa, 2009; Jayasuriya, 2010; Pritchard, 2011; Antunes, 2012; Lorenz, 2012; Commisso, 2013; Kašić, 2016; Damro & Friedman, 2018; Hujak & Sik-Lanyi, 2017; Lundbye-Cone, 2018; Streckeisen, 2018; Lucas, 2019). Specifically, Lundbye-Cone (2018) mentions a 'neoliberal cholera' in the EHEA policy-making (p.1022), with 'a neoliberal hegemony arching over the last two decades' (p.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 & 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 & 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, p.145). Evidently, neoliberalism is integral to the nature of the BP and all areas of its work, including how it is organised. However, De Wit (2018, p.20), calling for a distinction between means and goals in international policy-making, questions whether neoliberalism in Bologna 'was indeed the purpose of the process' or more of an inevitable consequence of a broader temporal, geopolitical and economic environment in which Bologna has been operating.

The focus of this chapter in particular is directed at the voice of inclusion on the international level in the neoliberal 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 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 & 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 of 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, p.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' (p.509). Holford (2014, p.7) and Kurtoğlu (2016, p.288) express similar ideas talking about 'a lost honour of the Social Dimension' and 'the weak status of social dimension', respectively. The definition of social dimension is associated with widening access to people of different socio-economic status (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Jungblut, 2017) and social mobility (Powell & Finger, 2013). Neugebauer et al (2016, p.51) question the ultimate outcome of this idea, arguing that the introduction of two cycles studies in the BP – Bachelor's and Master's – yield 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 one is, arguably, also about widening access but lifelong learning does not place the emphasis on people from lower socio-economic backgrounds unlike social dimension.

The focus of all of these studies is one of the action lines. The research presented in this chapter as well as in a few other chapters in this book do not focus only on one of the action lines but rather take a bird-eye view of the Bologna Process. Furthermore, the scholarship about these inclusion-related Bologna action lines has not yet explored the overall definition of inclusion in Bologna on the policy-making level, as well as the development of such definition, and has not analysed it in relation to neoliberalism. Below are presented the findings of the study that addresses this gap. They are also important in understanding the implementation gap when it comes to country case studies later in this book.

# 4. Methodology

The gap in the literature inspired the following important 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 was sought with the help of policy document searches on the EHEA website and manual qualitative thematic analysis of these documents.

26 key documents, issued between 1998 and 2020, were collected (see Appendix). All (12 in total) communiques and declarations, which are outcome documents from EHEA ministerial conferences, were collected because they presented the results of stocktaking of the achievements of the EHEA and further goals. Each of these documents was supplemented by a relevant work programme or plan (ten in total) to see concrete steps that resulted from the goals outlined in the declarations and communiques. The number of work plans and declarations/communiques is not equal because a work plan after the first conference in 1998 did not exist and the work plan for 2015-2018 has not been available on the website of the EHEA. This used to be the case for three other work plans too: 1999-2001, 2001-2003 and 2003-2005. Although they appeared in 2021, they include only a schedule of meetings that took place in-between the conferences. The lack of information in these three workplans justifies the decision to collect three reports covering these time periods. In addition to this, two annexes of the 2020 Communique are referenced as separate documents in the Appendix because they are presented as separate documents on the EHEA website and references to the annexes as separate documents were helpful in the analysis of the data later in this chapter. The main stage of data collection and analysis took place in 2018, followed by a supplementary stage in 2021 when four 2020 documents were added to the list, as

well as three work plans (1999-2001, 2001-2003 and 2003-2005) were found on the EHEA website after the content of the website, apparently, underwent some restructuring and enrichment.

Each of the declarations or communiques, and their related work programme, or plan, belong to one of 12 so-called periods of the development of the EHEA. These periods are identified for the purpose of analysis in this chapter based on the timeframes in-between each ministerial conference: 1998-2001, 2001-2003, 2003-2005, 2005-2007, 2007-2009, 2009-2012, 2012-2015, 2015-2018, 2018-2020, 2020-2024. 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. 2024 is suggested as the cut-off time because the next ministerial conference is planned for that year.

Thematic analysis of these documents, which was conducted manually, consisted of three 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', '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', 'special education needs' and their derivatives, such as 'inclusive', 'supportive', etc. Open coding for the neoliberal discursive elements was focused around such common neoliberal terminology identified by Ball (2017) as 'competition', 'excellence', 'performance', 'market', 'standards' etc. 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. The final stage of analysis, which was preceded by an additional stage of data collection, mentioned above, included processing the additional documents. The analysis in

the form of categories and sub-categories with relevant quotes was recorded on 37 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 chapter, 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.

# 5. 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. 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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal discourses in the BP has been evolving in the relevant policy texts since the commencement of the BP in 1998. The definition of inclusion remained vague in the international documents until 2020, as it was clear only in the Rome Communique (Appendix, EHEA, 2020a) what specific underprivileged groups are meant to be supported through the BP.

### *5.1. 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 chapter 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 a range of scholars (e.g, Holford, 2014; Kurtoğlu, 2016). 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, the research presented in this chapter analyses all of inclusion-related action lines and highlights inconsistencies in presenting

the relationships among these action lines in international 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 declaration (Appendix, EHEA, 2009): '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, p.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.

### *5.2. Connection between inclusion and neoliberalism in the BP*

The idea that neoliberal 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** strategies are necessary to face <u>the challenges of competitiveness</u> [neoliberal discourse] and the use of new technologies and <u>to improve social cohesion, equal opportunities</u> [inclusion discourse]' (Appendix, EHEA, 2001, p.2, my emphasis).*
>
> *'Ministers reaffirm the importance of **the social dimension** of the Bologna Process. <u>The need to increase competitiveness</u> [neoliberal discourse] must be balanced with the objective of improving the social characteristics of the European Higher Education Area, aiming at <u>strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and gender inequalities</u> [inclusion discourse]' (Appendix, EHEA, 2003, p.1, my emphasis).*
>
> *'**Student-centred learning** and mobility will help students <u>develop the competences they need in a changing labour market</u> [neoliberal 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, p.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 neoliberal 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.

### *5.3. 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 four phases in this evolving relationship could be distinguished: 1998-2005, 2005-2012, 2012-2020 and 2020-ongoing. The years overlap in these phases for the same reason as the periods of the development of the EHEA mentioned earlier in this chapter – 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 neoliberal discourse focused on the development of individual competitiveness and economic potential of the EHEA, which remained the same throughout the first three phases. So did the strength 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 most recent phase is particularly interesting as the trend of the intensification of the inclusion discourse has been preserved while the neoliberal discourse got fundamentally transformed.

The first phase in the evolving relationship of inclusion and neoliberalism (1998-2005) is characterised by relatively equal strengths of the inclusion and neoliberal discourses in the declarations, communiques, and their corresponding plans and programmes. This was judged on the basis of the occurrence of inclusive or neoliberal 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, p.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, p.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, was first used in 2003 (Appendix, EHEA, 2003, p.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, p.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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal 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 neoliberal 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, p.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, p.6).*

The third phase in the evolving relationship of inclusion and neoliberalism covers the timeframe of 2015-2020. 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 neoliberal 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, p.2)*

> *'We therefore commit to developing new and inclusive approaches for continuous enhancement of learning and teaching across the EHEA' (Appendix, EHEA, 2018, p.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 neoliberal discourse. It meant its transformation. Thus, Evans' (2018, p.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 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 neoliberal 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.

Up to the 2020 ministerial meeting, an explicit definition of inclusion was missing in the BP documents. There are gaps in the definition of inclusion because the key term – 'underrepresented 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, p.21).*

Other than that, the term 'underrepresented groups' is usually used in the first three phases 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, p.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 was left to individual countries to define who counted as underrepresented.

This is the case in many other documents issued in the first three periods 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, p.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 in the first three periods 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, p.6).*

The documentation produced in the framework of the 2020 Ministerial Conference in Rome, which marked the start of the fourth period (2020-ongoing) in the development of the definition of inclusion in Bologna, has addressed this significant gap about deciphering what marginalised groups are meant. Annex II of the Rome Ministerial Communique (Appendix, EHEA, 2020b) has rectified that by identifying and defining three sub-groups of marginalised students, acknowledging some overlaps amongst these groups but highlighting that these names are not synonymous: underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable. Some learners may be underrepresented because of:

*'…certain characteristics (e.g., gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socio-economic background, ethnic minorities) of its share among the students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020b, p.9).*

Disadvantaged students face:

*'…specific challenges compared to their peers… This can take many forms (e.g., disability, low family income, little or no family support, orphan, many school moves, mental health, pregnancy, having less time to study because one has to earn one's living by working or having caring responsibilities)' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020b, p.9).*

Finally, vulnerable students:

> *'…have special (protection) needs. For example, because they suffer from an illness (including mental health) or have a disability, because they are minors, because their residence permit depends on the success of their studies (and thus also on decisions made by individual teachers), because they are at risk of being discriminated against' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020b, p.9).*

Evidently, in this phase of the development of the relationship between inclusion and neoliberalism in the EHEA, the inclusion discourse has become much more detailed. It has also intensified significantly, as an inclusive EHEA is one of the three main sections in Rome Communique, along with an innovative and interconnected EHEA (Appendix, EHEA, 2020a), and the language of support for all and collaboration in this respect is treaded through the 2020 Communique and its three annexes. The neoliberal discourse has transformed further, becoming less explicit about competition and excellence while putting a lot more emphasis on standards. There is only a handful of direct mentioning of EHEA's competitiveness in the 2020 Communique and its three annexes, which was threaded through the previous documents. For example:

> *'Direct contacts and synergies among our diverse cultures and higher education systems through mobility of staff and students contribute to the excellence and relevance of higher education in the EHEA, making it attractive and competitive on the global scale' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020a, p.6).*

Neoliberal discourse is present in the discussion of various standards (e.g., in quality assurance, professional standards, standards in academic disciplines), which are mentioned throughout the Communique and its Annex II. Standards in the area of education are 'a device of neoliberalism' (Rasco, 2020, p.224). In these documents, the discussion of the standards and related benchmarking and accountability is interlinked with the emphasis on inclusion. The section 'an inclusive EHEA' in Rome Communique observing ethical standards in the context of relying on innovative technologies in HE as a related process to the aim to 'foster inclusion' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020a, p.5). The interconnection of neoliberal and inclusion discourses here evidences again how interrelated these two processes are.

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.

Earlier in the chapter, I presented the distinction between symbolic and material policies by Prunty (1985) and Rizvi and Lingard (2009). Based on this distinction, inclusion in the BP, particularly in the first three periods, resembles more symbolic policies than material policies. To

remind, symbolic policies are broad and to a degree ambiguous, offering only a few resources for implementation and lacking a concrete implementation strategy. Certainly, it is unclear who exactly the target audiences of the 'discursive ensemble' of the inclusion-related action lines in the first three periods in Bologna are, in Ball's (2017) terms. Kushnir (2017), discussing another Bologna action line and pointing out a similar lack of clarity in the implementation strategy, implies that the Bologna action lines might have been purposefully presented in the international documents to combine symbolic and material features of policies to allow for these policies to be materialised as they are implemented in national contexts. Nevertheless, the ambiguity of the inclusion-related lines and strategies for their implementation in the first three periods of Bologna seems to serve a different function in the neoliberal EHEA as any comprehensive list of pointers for their comparable operationalisation in the signatory countries is amiss until 2020. Some progress was 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). However, a concrete 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 was absent. The inclusion of the marginalised groups in HE was not feasible because the groups were not clearly identified. This is not surprising as according to Rizvi and Lingard (2009), symbolic policies are a likely feature of education in the neoliberal context. Evidently, the inclusion-related action lines, particularly in the first three periods of the development of inclusion in Bologna, are promoted largely as symbolic policies in the neoliberal EHEA through the international documents. It is worth acknowledging though that the 2020 conference outcome documents made a step towards closing the gap in how to implement inclusion ideas. Rome Communique plays a role here, albeit more minor than its Annexes II and III. Rome Communique includes the section 'Implementation', which is over a page long. It spells out a range of structures and processes that Bologna relies on in the achievement of its aims, such as the National Qualifications Frameworks, Council of Europe/UNESCO Lisbon Recognition Convention, the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees. The outline of how exactly these strategies can be implemented in national contexts is not provided. For example, this is what is mentioned about supporting refugees:

'We commit to reviewing our own legislation, regulations, and practice to ensure fair recognition of qualifications held by refugees, displaced persons and persons in refugee-like situations, even when they cannot be fully documented, in accordance with Article VII of the Lisbon Recognition Convention. We welcome the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees and will support further broadening its use in our systems' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020a, p.7).

Annex II entitled 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' provides a list and explanation of ten principles for strengthening the social dimension, and more importantly, offers definitions of three groups of marginalised

students (i.e., underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable). This extensive explanation may be interpreted as an attempt to solve the lack of clarity about whom inclusion in Bologna is meant to target in the past and answering my call 'for an urgent review of this problem in the Bologna Process at the European Higher Education Area ministerial conference scheduled for 2020' (Kushnir, 2020, p.485). More importantly, Annex III entitled 'Recommendations to National Authorities for the Enhancement of Higher Education Learning and Teaching in the EHEA', including such inclusion-related aspect as making 'student-centred learning a reality' (Appendix, EHEA, 2020c). The guidelines have clarified a lot of things, such as how to develop 'a structured dialogue on innovation and enhancement of learning and teaching' – by involving 'students, teachers and also relevant external stakeholders', and 'The issues addressed should include the development of curricula, learning outcomes, assessment and quality assurance, with due consideration for the skills needed to address current and future challenges of society'. However, it is left down to national authorities to identify the nature and frequency of the dialogue and how to make each of the named cohorts representative of their population. Clearly, a move towards materialising the symbolic policies of the international level about inclusion before presenting them for implementation in national contexts has been made.

# 6. Conclusion

This chapter has explored the evolution of the meaning of inclusion in the neoliberal context of the BP. The chapter has demonstrated that understanding 'inclusion' only with regard to lifelong learning, student-centred education and social dimension has pitfalls – there are overlaps amongst these action lines and, as a consequence, the relationships among them are unclear. A better way of understanding inclusion in Bologna may be through considering a tight relationship between the inclusion and neoliberal discourses in the support of marginalised groups in HE. The relationship has been evolving in relevant policy documents since 1998 which is the year that marks the commencement of Bologna. The inclusion discourse grew in strengths, while the neoliberal rhetoric firmly stood its ground since the beginning of the BP, while undergoing some transformations. In spite of such seemingly positive dynamic in the development of inclusion in the BP, its definition remained vague in the policy documents until 2020 as it was unclear which exact underprivileged groups were meant to be supported in the EHEA. The 2020 conference outcome documents made a significant step towards closing the gaps in our understanding of whom inclusion targets in Bologna and how to implement these inclusion ideas. This is a great and timely response at the international level to the call to review the problem voiced in my prior work (Kushnir, 2020), on the basis of which this chapter has been developed. The EHEA would benefit further from combining the celebration of this achievement with further support for different understanding of inclusion in a range of local contexts, as explained later in this book.

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# Appendix: Policy documents

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