

## **The Bologna Process as a Policy Transfer Issue**

Iryna Kushnir  
Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh  
i.kushnir@sms.ed.ac.uk

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### **Abstract**

The Bologna Process (BP) – a European policy initiative to make higher education degrees compatible and comparable to one another – is presented in literature from three main perspectives: incentives to join the BP, management of the BP and the BP implementation implications. The BP transfer process is discussed in literature partially and often only implicitly, and thus, it is under elaborated. The aim of this paper is to highlight research questions essential to the BP through relevant literature review of the BP and an analytic framework which is used to suggest the questions that could be answered in further research to fill in the research gap. This paper seeks to contribute to education policy scholarship by organising existing literature about the BP around three themes, by demonstrating the gap in the analysis of the BP as a policy transfer issue, and by suggesting directions for further investigation through outlining important research questions

*Keywords:* Bologna Process, policy transfer, higher education, Europe, research questions

### **Introduction**

This paper is part of an ongoing PhD research project into the debates around the Bologna Process (BP) as an issue of policy transfer. This paper is aimed at highlighting research questions essential to the topic through a relevant literature review of the BP and an analytic framework which is used to frame the questions. This paper makes a contribution to education policy scholarship by organising existing literature about the BP around three broad themes, by finding a gap in the analysis of the BP as a policy transfer issue, and by suggesting a set of questions for further investigation. These questions are important to guide further research into the BP policy transfer. Such research is needed to understand the context in which challenges in the implementation of the BP reforms arise. Recognising the specifics of the BP policy transfer would then help to seek solutions to the problems in the implementation of relevant reforms.

The BP is a European intergovernmental project which commenced in 1999 to promote cooperation in higher education. This is aimed at establishing and developing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2020 with objectives that include the adoption of comparable degrees in different countries, cycles of study process, system of credits, promotion of student and faculty mobility, quality assurance and European dimension. The work towards the achievement of these objectives is a matter of voluntary initiative of 47 states which belong to the EU and its nearby territory. According to the EHEA (2013) website, a ministerial conference is organised every 2-3 years to assess the progress of the EHEA. This includes approving new measures to be implemented and approving countries to be included in the BP. Refining research questions has been an iterative process with reviewing two bodies of literature: one about previous studies of the BP to identify a research gap, and the other one about an analytic framework which is used to frame questions that could be answered in further research to fill in the gap. I used exploratory literature review method which, according to Liston (undated), is focused on identifying key angles from which the BP and the analytic framework to address the gap in its research are presented in the literature. This paper includes three sections. First, previous research of the BP is discussed. Second, the adaptation of the policy transfer framework suggested by Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) to the BP is presented. Finally, research questions, the investigation of which has a potential for illuminating issues around the BP transfer, and thus, filling in the aforementioned gap, are outlined.

## **1. Previous Research on the BP**

The study of the BP is a growing field of scholarly inquiry. It has been discussed from a variety of perspectives that can be grouped into three broad themes: incentives to join the BP, management of the BP, and implications of the BP. These themes are discussed below to demonstrate that the BP as a policy transfer issue is analysed partially and often only implicitly, and thus, it is under elaborated.

### **1.1. Incentives to Join the BP**

There are apparently three incentives for countries to join the BP. The first type can be defined in Lazetic's (2010) terms as "peer pressure" (p. 557), or in Ravinet's (2008) terms as a "sense of obligation resulting from the paradigm of the knowledge-based economy" (p. 356). Corresponding ideas are also expressed by other scholars (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Fairclough & Wodak, 2008; Papatsiba, 2006). These claims suggest that the BP possesses a

positive image in terms of attracting new signatory countries.

The second incentive to join the BP is the need for European affiliation. Ravinet (2008) suggests that “a sense of obligation resulting from special interests” is an impetus to join the BP (p. 355). Interestingly, the so called ‘special interests’ are only discussed in the context of former socialist countries. A perspective is given on the link between the development of higher education through the BP in Central and Eastern Europe and the subsequent development of socio-economic context (Agasisti & Perez-Esparrells, 2009; Field, 2003; Janmaat & Piattoeva, 2007; Melikyan, 2011). Furthermore, Zgaga (2009) and Huisman and van der Wende (2004) state that the EU membership is the ultimate goal of Eastern and Central European countries to join the BP. This rhetoric seems to position the BP solely as a Western European modernising tool. And it seems to position the socialist past as a negative issue which is expected to be overcome by joining the BP. Moreover, this is the rhetoric of both insiders and outsiders of the post-socialist region, although it is difficult to determine the national identity of the authors of the above cited sources. For instance, Hasmik Melikyan seems to represent Armenia – a post-Soviet country (Melikyan, n. d.), and Tommaso Agasisti seems to come from Italy which does not belong to the post-Soviet region (Thirtieth Annual EAIR Forum, 2008). These references imply that the first and second incentives to join the BP offer better prospects within a collaborative EU.

The third incentive revolves around a nation’s sense of individualism and the drive for competition. Huisman and van der Wende (2004) mention a “scene of battle” where national governments aspire to strengthen their position on the background of the countries that have not yet achieved the Bologna objectives (p. 353). These authors, as well as Kupfer (2010) and Zgaga (2009), express the idea that joining the BP may also be used as a justification to push reforms on the national level – a strategic appropriation – aimed at empowering the nation rather than the creation of the EHEA. This idea is exemplified by the statement that the Russian government was motivated to join the BP in order “to bring the Russian higher education into accord with the requirements of a knowledge-based society and raise the competitiveness of the Russian economy” (Ganze et al., 2008, p. 539). The focus on the Russian economy instead of a European one fundamentally hinders the creation of the EHEA, and the collective identity behind it.

The literature about the incentives to join the BP does not provide explicit references as to the relationship between the BP transfer process and incentives. Nevertheless, they can

be argued to be associated with part of the BP transfer process – the reasons of transfer. However, it should be acknowledged that the incentives of countries to join the BP are a far narrower area than the reasons of policy transfer. It is so because the former area involves just national policy-makers, whereas the latter one is about all actors participating in the BP transfer process.

## **1.2. Management of the BP**

This theme has two main dimensions. One of them is the interplay of actors and levels of policy making discussed by a group of scholars, focusing on the actors associated with the supranational and national levels (Lazetic, 2010; Terry, 2010; Witte, 2006). There is additional smaller further research on actor dynamics in the BP management at the supranational level (Corbett, 2011; Lazetic, 2010; Ravinet, 2008). Additionally, a study of management at the institutional level in the form of exercising institutional autonomy is outlined by Neave (2009). None of these studies include a full account of the interplay of all actors and all levels that are critical for a comprehensive analysis of the BP transfer process.

The other dimension of management issues in the BP is related to the evaluation of the dynamic nature of the BP. For example, the BP is a ‘moving target’ because every ministerial communiqué adds new elements, changing the character of the BP goals from structural to substantive (Kehm, 2010; Yagci, 2010). One more example of the dynamic nature of the BP is the shift from a voluntary enterprise at the supranational level to a more binding initiative at the national level (Ravinet, 2008; Zgaga, 2009). Another dynamic feature of the BP is the changing role of the EU with two hidden directions. On the one hand, a shift from incorporating solely EU countries to the involvement of non-EU member states is happening. Firstly, the BP, which previously incorporated only EU countries, now includes non-EU countries as well. This is evident in the Sorbonne Declaration which was signed by only four EU member states. Documents on the EHEA (2013) website show that further ministerial meetings have led to the incorporation of non-EU members into the BP. Additionally, even though the Prague Ministerial Communiqué (2001) states that the Bologna Follow-up Group should be chaired by the state that holds the EU presidency, non-EU countries have been invited to co-chair the Bologna Follow-up Group since 2009. On the other hand, increasing incorporation of EU-based initiatives to the BP can be traced. One example is the Prague Ministerial Communiqué (2001) that contains the following claim: “The choice of Prague to hold this meeting is a symbol of their [ministers’] will to involve

the whole of Europe in the process [the BP] in the light of enlargement of the European Union” (p. 1). This statement might suggest that the incorporation of new non-EU BP participants is associated with the recruitment of new member states to the EU. The same Communiqué also proclaims the necessity to have a Follow-up group that comprises countries participating in the BP and the European Commission which is a representative body of the EU. All of these points are important to understand the BP, yet they do not shed enough light on a variety of ways of the BP transfer by different actors.

### **1.3. Implications of the BP**

This theme in the literature is embedded in the discussion of whether the BP yields convergence of education systems or preserves their divergence. This is, perhaps, only one of the issues associated with the ways of the BP transfer. One group of scholars argues for the convergence of higher education in the BP member states (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Field, 2003; Huisman & van der Wende, 2004; Papatsiba, 2006; Pyykko, 2008). Paradoxically, this idea seems not to be reflected in a direct acknowledgement of actual harmonisation of the content of education systems internationally (see the discussion of divergence below), rather, it is mediated by the discussion of fear caused by the disappearance of some national peculiarities and the BP as a threat for national education systems. This loss of national distinctiveness implies nations’ adjustment to some common model.

Another group of scholars argues in favour of the persistence of divergence of the content of education systems under current international policy attempts to homogenise them (Dale & Robertson, 2009; Grek, 2008; Lawn & Grek, 2012; Novoa, 2007; Witte, 2006). Additionally, many scholars who conduct cross-country comparisons of implementing the BP have pointed out that the crucial role of a country’s cultural, historical, economic context does shape a different BP experience in each country (Dittrich et al., 2004; Heinze & Knill, 2008; Papatsiba, 2006; Pyykko, 2008; Zgaga, 2009). These differences further reinforce a diverging trend seen in many countries where there is not much change in substance in implementing the BP. Examples of this diverging trend include:

- The preservation of a traditional degree structure along with the acquisition of the BP cycles in Russia and Switzerland (ESU Report, 2005; Pyykko, 2008);
- The lack of “quality control mechanism” in Portugal (Portela et al., 2009, p. 467);
- The introduction of the system of credits without assigning a student workload system to it in some post-Soviet countries, as well as Denmark, Finland and Norway (ESU

Report, 2005; Zgaga, 2009);

- The lack of non-structural elements of the BP like student involvement in governance of higher education in all countries (Kehm, 2010; Yagci, 2010);
- The corruption in Serbia and Ukraine (Field, 2003; Osipian, 2010; Round & Rodgers, 2009);
- The difference in understanding the BP key terms by the stakeholders in different countries (Lazetic, 2010; Rauhvargers, 2004);
- The absence of the BP influence on easing visa and work permits issues (Lazetic, 2010).

In light of the current literature discussed, a comprehensive analysis of the BP transfer process is evidently missing.

## **2. Conceptual Framework: Policy Transfer and its Components**

After outlining three broad themes of prior studies of the BP to demonstrate a gap in addressing the BP as a policy transfer issue, it is timely to look at the literature about policy transfer. This body of literature is applied to the identified gap and serves as a bridge to frame research questions.

### **2.1. Policy Transfer**

‘Policy transfer’ is one of the most controversial concepts in policy related literature. First, it is referred by some scholars as an *umbrella term* for all versions of policy movement processes. For instance, Steiner-Khamsi (2002) claims that policy transfer means a combination of borrowing and learning. And Hulme (2005) argues for a broader vision of policy transfer, stating that it can be a theoretical tool to link various perspectives on international policy change. However, he acknowledges that the concept is only “an opportunity to illuminate the processes of policy change,” (Hulme, 2005, p. 418) and not to explain everything. Furthermore, Bissell and Freeman (2011) explicitly talk about transfer as an overarching term for different policy change processes.

Second, the term policy transfer has been used synonymously with ‘diffusion,’ ‘translation and ‘learning drawing.’ Stone (2011) states that diffusion, transfer, translation share a relationship with the idea of policy interdependency. This author states that diffusion is a more frequent term in literature produced by United States trained scholars, whereas transfer tends to be used by Europe trained scholars. Although this distinction might seem to

be over-simplified and over-generalised, it implies that the similarity in processes denoted by the discussed terms may be substantial.

Third, transfer can also be referred to as a ‘component’ of some bigger process of policy change or movement. For example, transfer is viewed as “one constitutive element of transnational governance” (Stone, 2011, p. 17), as well as a possible consequence of policy learning (Grin and Loeber, 2007).

Although Hulme (2005) mentions the danger of being trapped in the “infinite regression” in reworking the meanings of the term transfer (p. 424,) the multiplicity of the above mentioned ways to approach this concept suggests a scope for any definition of it, suitable for the research being conducted. Therefore, frequent claims in literature that the term transfer in relation to policy is too limited can be challenged. Freeman (2009) argues against this term because he sees it as a concept denoting a linear process of picking up a policy from place A and putting it in place B without any change. Obviously, this is a simplified vision of policy movement. However, different interpretations of policy transfer allow for any definition of this term including the one Freeman (2009) assigns to translation that suggests the mutation of policy as it travels.

Given that the meaning of transfer is open for different interpretations, the essence of the BP transfer is approached as a site for investigation. There are certain components within the BP that can be identified to guide further investigation. The idea to approach transfer as a combination of certain components was inspired by the conceptual framework put forward by Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000) who dismantle policy transfer process into a number of facets.

## **2.2. Policy Transfer Components: Dolowitz and Marshs Framework**

Dolowitz and Marshs (2000) framework includes the following question-based components: why the policy is transferred, who is involved in transfer, what is transferred, from where, what are the degrees of transfer, what are the constraints on transfer, how to demonstrate policy transfer, and how transfer leads to policy failure. The appraisal and criticism of this framework can be traced in debates among several scholars in the past few years.

On the one hand, Dussaugne-Laguna (2012) notes that the framework has been quite influential, supporting the claims by Dolowitz and Marsh (2012) that “many authors have used our framework in their empirical research” (p. 339). On the other hand, Benson and

Jordan (2011) mention that even though a number of researchers have followed the framework, some of them were criticised for conducting a positivist research. This type of research, according to Guba and Lincoln (1994), is associated with looking at the existing apprehendable reality that is driven by natural laws and mechanisms, and the knowledge about which is organised in “time- and context-free generalizations” (p. 109). The researchers and their objects of investigation are viewed as independent from each other. As a response to the claim that the framework is associated with positivist research, Dolowitz and Marsh (2012) argue that their framework does not predetermine this types of research because the framework is heuristic, and “a heuristic does not reify a reality; rather it offers a way of approaching a subject that can provide a basis for empirical investigation” (p. 343). Moreover, the authors of the framework claim that it is not a theory because “it stands or falls in relation to whether others find it useful for understanding/explaining aspects of the policy-making process” (p. 339). In addition, there seems to be another similar critique about the conceptual framework – lack of the reference to agency because of the emphasis on agents (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2012). However, the framework does not restrict the analysis of agency on policy transfer process in any way. It is a matter of researchers’ choice of how they approach the framework to generate answers. For instance, the answer to the question *why* and *how* can offer a scope for the analysis of agency of actors involved.

The idea that the framework is a promising tool for successful BP transfer investigation that can be guided by the questions that will be highlighted in this paper stems from the questions raised in the conceptual framework (see Table 1 for the adaptation of the framework to the BP transfer). These questions have been answered to varying degrees, “leaving plenty of room for new research to bloom” (Benson & Jordan, 2011, p. 373). Nevertheless, a conceptual decay of the framework is not yet possible (Benson & Jordan, 2012), and “there is a lot left to understand about how, why, where and with what consequences policies circulate” (McCann & Ward, 2012, p. 325). In addition, Gilbert (2001) discusses the importance of theories and conceptual frameworks in general, and states that different combinations of the two can inspire novel approaches to analysis.



Table 1  
*Adaptation of Conceptual Framework*

Why	→	Why
Who	→	Who
What	→	What
From where	→	Where
Degree of transfer	}	How
Constraints on transfer		
How to demonstrate transfer		
How transfer leads to policy failure		

*Note.* Adapted from Dolowitz and Marsh (2000, p. 9)

### 3. Research Questions

The integration of the discussion of previous research on the BP that suggested a gap in looking at the BP transfer, and the discussion of Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) policy transfer framework that inspired a question based approach to looking at the BP transfer serves as a ground to put forward the following research questions outlined in Box 1.

<p><i>Box 1. Research questions</i></p> <p><i>Major</i></p> <p>What is the nature of the BP policy transfer?</p> <p><i>Subsidiary</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Where does the BP transfer happen?</li> <li>2. Who participates in the BP transfer?</li> <li>3. What is transferred?</li> <li>4. Why is the BP transferred?</li> <li>5. How is the BP transferred?</li> </ol>
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The research questions are essential to the topic of the BP as their investigation can illuminate issues around the BP transfer.

## Conclusion

This paper presented a literature review in two areas. First, scholarly discussions of the BP were used to identify a gap in addressing the BP as a policy transfer issue. Second, a framework with key questions and components was reviewed, analysed and adapted to look at the BP transfer. This paper also highlighted research questions essential to the BP transfer. A contribution to education policy scholarship is made by organising existing literature about the BP around three broad themes, by recognising a gap in the BP as a process of policy transfer and by suggesting a set of questions for further investigation.

Analysis of the BP transfer is important for boosting understanding of the BP in general. Further investigation of the suggested research questions will help address the gap in the BP as a process of policy transfer. This is expected to show that it is not merely the interplay between a country's domestic context and external forces that influences and determines reform implementation results, as argued elsewhere (Pyykko, 2008; Zgaga, 2009; Papatsiba, 2006). Worth noting is that a reform transfer process can be recognised as another mediator to this influence, and a key element in understanding the present functions of the BP. Lastly, this study is important for a broad scholarly area of inquiry – Europeanisation in education. Literature on European higher education policy making is still focused on the EU members and applicant countries. Few attempts have been made to discuss the context of non-EU states or applicant countries in relation to European higher education policy-making like Moldova (Cusnir, 2008) and Armenia (Melikyan, 2011). The suggested research questions can be used to investigate the BP transfer in the countries which are not EU member or applicant states that will bring geographical European periphery into the discussion of European higher education policy making and transfer.

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