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Rational-Choice Neo-Institutionalism in Europeanization in the UK and Germany: A Toolkit Offered by Their Memberships in the European Higher Education Area

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an analysis of an increasingly political nature of the rationales behind the memberships of the UK and Germany in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). This analysis is guided by rational-choice neo-institutionalism and is based on expert interviews with key stakeholders in both countries as well as their relevant official communications. This article serves as an important stepping-stone to the investigation of the link between EHEA memberships and its signatories' external politics.

Introduction

Although some scholars, evidently, anticipated or assumed the end of the Bologna Process (BP) in 2020 (Gareis & Broekel, 2022; Mendick & Peters, 2023; Pires Pereira et al., 2023), the BP has not finished and is still very much alive. Its nature—over-discussed by everyone involved in the higher education (HE) sector to the point that it was about to be forgotten—suggests that the BP does not require an extensive introduction here. At the same time, BP's recent operation somewhere far in the background of what we, academics and researchers, deal with on a daily basis necessitates a brief reminder about some key issues.

A formal development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) started in 1998 with the initiative of four countries: the UK, France, Germany, and Italy. Representatives of their key institutions in HE at the time—ministries of education—came together to agree on formalizing the development of a platform for far-reaching cooperation in HE in the European region. A year later, the BP was established and recognized as a tool for developing the EHEA. The BP has evolved over time, but essentially, it has been about harmonizing HE structures in the EHEA to ease academic mobility and employability (e.g., same cycles of studies, same credit system to measure workload, quality assurance standards, etc.) (EHEA, 2022a). More recently, it has also focused more on developing and implementing the values of democracy and academic freedom in the EHEA, as suggested by the Rome Ministerial Communique (2020). This same Communique summarized the successes of the EHEA up to 2020 which marked the deadline for the achievement of a fully functioning EHEA, and outlined a plan for its further development until 2030.

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Not only did the scope of the Bologna initiatives evolve, but so did the territorial reach of the EHEA. Currently, there are 47 active members in the EHEA (see [Figure 1](#)), following the suspension of the memberships of Russia and Belarus in April 2022 in response to the invasion of Ukraine (EHEA, 2022b).



Figure 1. Forty-seven active members of the EHEA since April 2022.
Source: EHEA (2022c).

As shocking as the war in Ukraine is, it came after other recent (relatively less) rocking events in the European region, such as Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic which have all had their sweeping political consequences. The phenomenon of politics in this article plays an important contextual function, as in any other discussions on education-related matters, given that education is never neutral and always political (Whitty, 2002). This is why Europeanization, or more precisely—the politics of Europeanization, is central in the discussion of the UK and German memberships in the EHEA.

The analysis of an increasingly political nature of the rationales behind HE policy-making in the UK and Germany in the context of their EHEA memberships brings us to the unplowed research terrain of the link between EHEA memberships and these countries' external and very different politics—Germany being the leader of Europeanization trends in the region (Daehnhardt, 2022), and the UK, arguably, having distanced itself from active Europeanization following Brexit. This article frames this discussion as a collective case study, in Stake's (1994) terms, endeavoring to answer: *How do key Bologna institutions in the UK and Germany rationalize their EHEA memberships in relation to their wider Europeanization agendas?*

Relying on expert interviews with representatives from key policy-making institutions in both countries, the article argues that recent continuing UK and German memberships in the EHEA in the post-Brexit-vote era are a rational and strategic choice, with Europeanization becoming a space for rational meaning-making and the EHEA being a tool for this meaning-making. Furthermore, while both the UK and Germany are among the founders of the EHEA, and HE actors in both countries express the need to maintain political power in the region, their ways of doing so are different. Germany takes a noticeably active responsibility for the cooperation in the European region, defined here as the region within the boundaries of the active EHEA members. UK's position is not linear because of its two memberships in the EHEA, preserved post-Brexit—a separate Scottish membership and another membership collectively for England,

Wales, and Northern Ireland (EWNI). Scotland appears to be a victim of Brexit, and has been relying on its EHEA membership to mend its damaged relationship in HE cooperation and beyond with the EU countries. EWNI takes a more passive observational and neoliberal benefit-drawing stance with regard to its EHEA membership. However, despite these differences, cooperation in the HE for a wider politics of cooperation is on everyone's agenda.

To unpack the complexity of the above argument, the article proceeds with outlining theoretical ideas around rational choice neo-institutionalism in Europeanization and contextualizing the two case studies—the UK and Germany—with the help of a review of prior research into their participation in the EHEA. Following this, the methodological decisions that informed the empirical enquiry here are presented before outlining and discussing key empirical findings.

Rational-Choice Neo-Institutionalism in Europeanization

The neo-institutionalist approach, as the name suggests, is an updated version of the institutional theory that has been applied to study the role of institutions—or in other terms: organizations, stakeholders, or actors—in Europeanization throughout its history (Peters, 2019). While institutionalism focused on institutional structures and their rigidity, neo-institutionalism places the focus on the interaction between institutions and wider contexts which acknowledges wider-context-induced organizational change despite the default rigidity of organizations (Peters, 2019). Three interconnected strands have developed in neo-institutionalism: rational-choice, historical and sociological (Peters, 2019). While the focus of this article rests predominantly on the terrain of rational-choice neo-institutionalism, some links here to the other two strands should also be acknowledged.

The essence of rational-choice neo-institutionalism is encapsulated in the following eloquent quote by Graziano and Vink (2017, p. 40) about “increasing political opportunities provided by European integration ... when domestic political actors ‘rationally’ use European resources to support predefined preferences.” The EHEA membership serves as such as resource for the UK (Scotland and EWNI) and Germany and represents their rational choice to participate in a form of Europeanization. So rational-choice neo-institutionalism shapes the focus on the *rationalization* of EHEA memberships in the UK and Germany for strategic purposes by key Bologna organizations, as explicated in the research question explored in this article. Historical neo-institutionalism will, in part, support this theorization of the recent rational choices since it is unavoidable to consider how past events in the development of Europe may inform the current rational choices of key EHEA actors. And while the emphasis of the sociological strand on the interaction between organizations and individuals is not the prime focus of this study, the paramount role of individuals in shaping organizational responses is undeniable. Hence, the individuals that represent EHEA stakeholders in both case studies are, *sine quaestione*, valuable sources of information at interviews (see section Methodological approach) about how these organizations form their responses regarding Europeanization-related agenda in the framework of their EHEA memberships.

The constructions of the meaning of Europeanization is a journey—the journey which is still ongoing. Given that Europe itself has been a “space of meaning” (Lawn & Grek, 2012, p. 13), similarly, Europeanization is, arguably, a process of rationally “institutionalizing”—in Radaelli's (2004, p. 3) terms—of those meanings. A single view of Europe and what it means to be “European” is lacking, given the fluidity of European borders (e.g., EU vs. geographical Europe) and mission (Kushnir, 2022). Post-WWII peace-building and security on the continent through the cultivation of a common European identity and democratic values, following the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in 1991, was the main impetus for the emergence of the EU and its development after the Maastricht Treaty ratified in 1993 (Dedman, 2009). Nevertheless, this initial motivation of peace-building and the focus on promoting security to keep developing the Europeanization within and beyond the EU seems to have lost its relevance with time.

Polyakova (2016, p. 70) claims that “Mainstream politicians too often rely on the worn-out trope of a Europe ‘whole, free, and at peace’—a phrase that spoke to generations that remembered World War II and the Cold War. But younger Europeans are searching for a vision for the future that speaks to their values now, not to ideals that emerged out of past calamities.” Polyakova (2016) continues, stating that the old ideals of Europe are not necessarily instantiated in the bureaucratic procedures of the present EU, while both the EU and the wider European region have to deal with new challenges and justify their existence and future mission.

Rational meaning-making through the search for new drivers for such a justification at least before the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 put education by policy-makers in the EU and many of its neighbors at the center of their increasingly joint policy-making and search for the underlying mission for that cooperation. For example, over a decade ago, Grek (2008) stated: “... education is slowly moving from the margins of European governance to the very center of its policy making” (p. 208). Kushnir (2021) has highlighted a similar trend emphasizing how the European Education Area, as a series of initiatives for all levels of education in the EU countries, has been utilized by EU policy-makers to aid EU deepening in the context of various interlocking crises (e.g., the rise of populism, economic crises). Robertson et al. (2016) suggest that HE in particular has played a key role in crafting the European project through the facilitation of academic mobility, aiding the creation of a European single market and a European citizen. The center-stage that education has enjoyed in the EU has been, undoubtedly, significant but not as uniting as the peace-building mission that led to the creation of the EU. The European institutions that were created after 1945, understandably, were designed, partly, to make another war in Europe politically unthinkable and materially impossible. However, inevitably, those institutions, thus, placed a strong emphasis on elite governance rather than popular participation. A Europe based on education seems to have started emerging as a more genuinely people’s Europe than the postwar institutions bequeathed to us. Education became a tool to overcome a lack of unity in “differentiated Europeanization” (Stubbs, 1996, p. 283) within the EU amongst the peoples of Europe, and moreover, to develop deep connections between the EU, its member states, and importantly, its neighbors, such as in the EHEA.

Mapping Prior Research on the BP and European Trends in the UK and Germany

The following literature review about the UK and Germany maps the field of the available research on their involvement in the EHEA in the context of wider Europeanization trends in both countries, highlighting the gaps in rationalizing EHEA memberships to support particular visions of Europeanization that the empirical research presented later addresses. The below literature review considered studies about the UK and Germany in the wider area of policy and politics as well as more specifically in the area of HE, with the latter one covering relevant publications since the establishment of the EHEA in 1998.

Europeanization in the UK and Germany

UK’s historic attitude toward Europeanization is summarized well by Grek and Ozga (2009, p. 941): “the UK imagined itself to have retained imperial status and looked on the choice of the European ‘project’ as one of many possibilities” before it ended up being “dragged into a reluctant partnership in Europe.” Then, UK’s membership in the EU was a matter of “balancing [its] ... ‘Ins’ and ‘Outs’” (Fletcher, 2009, p. 71). Euroscepticism as a strong sentiment in UK politics explains the politics of “split Europeanization” (Crescenzi et al., 2018, p. 117). In sum, there has been a divergence in the attitudes toward Europeanization in the UK, with England representing the majority of the Eurosceptic views and Scotland expressing quite strong pro-European attitudes (Hepburn, 2006). This has, apparently, remained a trend after Brexit too (Stolz, 2020).

Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect an absolute convergence in the attitudes toward Europeanization or any other matter in any country. In Germany, too, a variety of views is present. However, despite the existence of Eurosceptic sentiments, such as those of the Alternative for Germany Party, “Germany has always been a strong power in the European integration ... , and few would question Germany’s ideological commitment to the European project in general” (Caporaso, 2021, p. 18). This idea echoes strongly in the scholarship on German Europeanization which highlights German learning process in leading the way for EU Europeanization (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020; Schoeller, 2019) and its assertive manner in doing so (Daehnhardt, 2022). A lot of German Europeanization follows a bottom-up approach, given the independence that the 16 federal states have from the central government in policy-making (Kazanoğlu, 2021).

What concerns EHEA membership, the first striking difference between UK and Germany is that while Germany has one membership, the UK has two (as already mentioned earlier)—Scotland and EWNI. Figure 2 below displays how these two memberships of the UK are presented on the EHEA website, with “the United Kingdom” referring to EWNI, and “United Kingdom (Scotland)” referring only to Scotland. The single German membership has its own complexity, though, in that Germany’s federal states’ independence in policy-making.

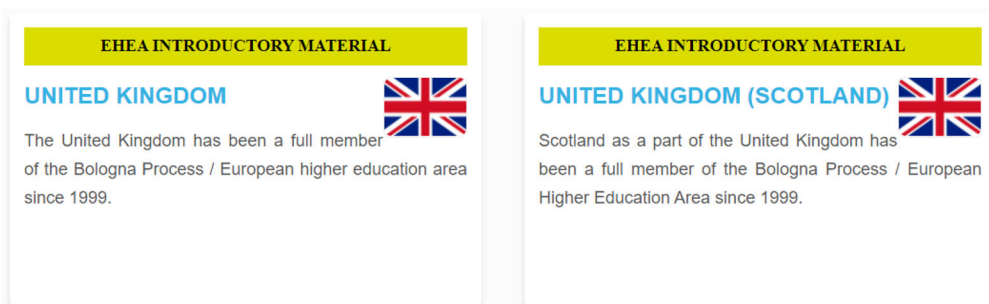


Figure 2. Two UK memberships in the EHEA. Source: EHEA (2022d).

The BP “Largely Ignored” in the UK, Both in Implementation and Research about It

Prior research into UK’s participation in the EHEA is quite limited. This is perhaps due to the fact that the UK was not actively seeking to implement any Bologna related reforms in the way that would bring in significant changes in its HE. Marquand and Scott (2018, p. 127) who focus predominantly on England and Wales explain this arguing that the BP has been “largely ignored” there in comparison to EU countries. Such lack of interest particularly in England is also discussed by Sin (2012) and Sin and Saunders (2014). The differentiation between UK nations in relation to the BP appeared more recently, while most earlier studies are less clear about such distinctions (e.g., Furlong, 2005; Witte, 2008). This is not surprising as Grek and Ozga (2009, p. 939) pointed out a while ago that the UK is often mistakenly presented “as a unitary state” when it comes to education policy. The focus of the limited number of earlier studies on the BP in the UK is predominantly on the work of (rather than the implementation of!) the Bologna action points in HE in the UK (or the policies that are compatible with them): quality assurance (Hartley & Virkus, 2003), study cycles (Field, 2005; Witte, 2008), lifelong learning (Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009).

The only two studies that make a clear analytical distinction between EWNI and Scotland in Bologna are Birtwistle (2009) and Kushnir and Brooks (2022). Birtwistle (2009, p. 59) focuses on one of the Bologna action points—the European Credit Transfer System: “The EWNI (England, Wales, Northern Ireland) part of the UK is shown as being regarded as weak in its use and implementation of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) ... whereas Scotland is shown as having strength in this area.” Unlike Birtwistle (2009), Kushnir and Brooks (2022)

focus on the EHEA membership of EWNI and Scotland holistically, looking into the difference in the strategic significance of these memberships for the two regions' HE in the post-Brexit context.

Most recent studies that are associated with Bologna in the UK (e.g., academic mobility) are not explicitly focused on the Bologna action points or UK's membership in the EHEA more broadly (e.g., Brooks, 2021; Brusenbauch Meislová, 2021; Zotti, 2021). Only a few of such recent studies do discuss Bologna explicitly. For instance, Reilly and Sweeney (2021, p. 86) state that “a pragmatic, negotiated solution would have allowed full UK participation in Erasmus” post-Brexit given that it remains part of the EHEA, and Morgan (2022), who focuses on Wales, discusses its navigation of education policy in the context of Brexit while remaining in the EHEA.

Continuous Researchers' Interest in German Involvement in the BP

Unlike previous literature on the BP in the UK which demonstrates a general lack of interest in the BP, there is a strong continuous interest in the scholarship in the process of the Bologna reforms as well as the implementation outcomes and the impact of Bologna in Germany.

When it comes to analyzing the process of relevant reforms, policy fragmentation in the implementation in the German federalized education system is the aspect that is always at the forefront. Specifically, Toens (2009, p. 246) highlights that despite what they call “the joint decision-making trap of German educational federalism,” the Bologna reforms have been much more successful in Germany due to soft governance and the “openness, ambiguity, and the complete absence of binding commitments” that comes with it, as compared to any previous reforms. There has been a lot more interest in implementing Bologna in Germany than, for example, in England and Wales, according to Marquand and Scott (2018) who compare the two countries efforts to Aesop's “The Tortoise and the Hare” fable in which the Hare ended up losing the race to the Tortoise. The moral of the story is that a slow and steady pace wins over jumping into conclusions about being good and not needing to try hard. Marquand and Scott (2018) compare Germany to the Tortoise and England and Wales—to the Hare, in their approaches to implementing the BP.

Literature on the evaluation of implementation outcomes and the impact of Bologna in Germany is diverse. There are studies that are focused on the impact of the BP on certain areas of studies, such as legal (Bucker & Woodruff, 2008; Riedel, 2005), medical (Hensen, 2010), or teacher training education (Kleß & Pfeiffer, 2013), highlighting structural adaptations to the Bologna action points. There is also research available on the impact of Bologna reforms on the university system in Germany in general with regard to, for instance, how students' workload is measured and quality in HE is understood (De Rudder, 2010; Turner, 2019; Winkel, 2010). Additionally, there are studies on the impact of Bologna reforms on such specific aspects of German HE as doctoral programs (Guth, 2006), student mobility (Gareis & Broekel, 2022), and a resulting blurring of the boundary between university and non-university HE (Witte et al., 2008).

Given that the BP has been like a snowball embracing various HE initiatives as it has been developing (Dobbins & Knill, 2009), there have also been growing recent studies with indirect references to Bologna in Germany, similarly to the UK. Examples include HE student mobility (e.g., Netz & Grüttner, 2021) or graduate employability (e.g., Petzold, 2021).

Evidently, the BP has had more prominence in Germany than in the UK and Germany has been more responsive to implementing Bologna action points. With regard to the UK, Bologna is silenced in the most recent studies, the distinctions between EWNI's and Scotland's memberships is presented, to the best of our knowledge, only in two studies (Birtwistle, 2009; Kushnir & Brooks, 2022). Only Kushnir and Brooks (2022) attempt to spell out the significance of EHEA memberships for the UK post-Brexit with the focus on Europeanization specifically in HE with only a few contextual references to the wider political Europeanization trends; however, that study does not focus on the wider Europeanization agenda of the country, does not position the discussion in the wider context of other countries' voices, such as Germany, and does not unpack the nuances of the rational-choice

of the neo-institutionalism in the international context after Brexit, with elements of comparison. The comparison offered by Marquand and Scott (2018), cited above, predates Brexit, does not focus on neo-institutionalism, and does not deal with both memberships of the UK in the EHEA. Moreover, the vast literature specifically on Bologna Germany lacks the focus on the meaning of German membership of the EHEA for the country.

Methodological Approach

This article addresses the aforementioned overlapping gaps in the scholarship about the EHEA in general and specifically in the UK and Germany, as well as the scholarship about meaning-making regarding Europeanization in both founders of the EHEA. To remind, it was set out to answer how key Bologna institutions in the UK and Germany rationalize their EHEA memberships in relation to their wider Europeanization agendas.

This article reports on an aspect of a two-case-study extract from a larger four-case-study project that covers all four founders of the EHEA: the UK, Germany, France, and Italy. BERA (2018) Research Ethics Guidelines informed research design of this collective case-study and a favorable ethics decision was obtained from the Schools of Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (BLSS REC) at Nottingham Trent University (UK) before data collection.

The focus here is on two main cases: (1) the UK and (2) Germany, recognizing the uniqueness of UK's case which is subdivided into a further two sub-cases: (1a) EWNI and (1b) Scotland. UK devolved administrations and their related policy actors work together in governing HE in different parts of the UK (Gallacher & Raffe, 2012), and thus, tight links and some overlaps in the work of key stakeholders from EWNI and Scotland were considered.

Data collection for both cases relied primarily on online in-depth semi-structured elite interviews with an opportunistic/snowball sample of stakeholders (UK $n = 6$; Germany $n = 8$ —see Table 1 and Data Availability Statement), initially recruited through contact information of these stakeholders' on the EHEA website and subsequent contacts that followed. The interviews were conducted in 2021-early 2022, lasted about an hour each, and being informed by the rational-choice neo-institutionalist approach, focused on strategic decisions of these stakeholders regarding their work in the EHEA. Researcher's strong expertise in elite interviewing facilitated this part of data collection. Insider's position in the UK HE sector currently as well as in other European countries previously facilitated rapport building.

Additionally, supplementary data were sought from UK and German Bologna stakeholders' official communications of various types (e.g., national policy documents, organization-level documents, press releases, etc.), issued between 2016 and 2022 (UK $n = 19$; Germany $n = 10$). The time span between 2016 and 2022 was chosen because of the 2016 Brexit referendum in the UK, which intensified the debates about European cooperation in the UK and beyond in 2016, with 2022 marking the end of the data collection phase for these case studies. While some documents were kindly provided by the interviewees, other official communications were searched on the stakeholders' websites, using the keywords "Bologna," "European Higher Education Area,"

Table 1. List of interviewees from the key Bologna stakeholders in both countries.

<i>N</i>	Representatives from UK stakeholders	Representatives from German stakeholders
1	GuildHE (EWNI and Scotland)	Federal Ministry of Education and Research
2	A key higher education actor in the UK (Scotland)	A key HE actor in Germany
3	National Union of Students (NUS-UK) (EWNI)	A key HE actor in Germany
4	Scottish Government (Scotland)	Rectors' Conference
5	Universities UK International (EWNI)	Free association of students' unions (FZS)
6	National Union of Students (NUS-Scotland) (Scotland)	Erasmus + National Agency, DAAD
7		A key HE actor in Germany
8		Education and Science Workers' Union (GEW)

“EHEA,” “European Union,” and “Brexit.” For some of the Bologna actors listed on the EHEA website, the search did not return any results (EHEA, 2022e, 2022f, 2022g). This may be due to their more passive involvement in the reforms, as some of them also suggested in their e-mail responses to the invitations for interviews. The stakeholders’ whose official communications have been analyzed and their number is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Official communications from stakeholders.

		Number of official communications analyzed per stakeholder	Total number per case study
From UK stakeholders	Central government (EWNI and Scotland)	4	19
	Quality Assurance Agency (EWNI and Scotland)	1	
	Universities UK International (EWNI and Scotland)	12	
	Association of Colleges (EWNI and Scotland)	1	
	Universities Scotland (Scotland)	1	
From German stakeholders	Federal government	6	10
	Federal government’s advisory body (German Science and Humanities Council)	1	
	Rectors’ Conference	2	
	Collaborative report (federal government, Rectors’ Conference, DAAD, FZS, Accreditation Council, DSW, GEW, BDA)	1	

Interview audio-recordings were transcribed and anonymized and analyzed thematically, along with the official communications. Rubin and Rubin (2012) guide for open and axial coding of themes guided the analysis. The open coding stage was informed by the conceptual framework spelled out earlier in the article, and the emerging themes and sub-themes generated separately for each case study were illustrated by a list of relevant quotations from both datasets: interview transcripts and official communications. The themes were regrouped in the axial coding and the final five super-ordinate themes (e.g., the EHEA as a platform for political cooperation) with relevant sub-themes were identified for all case studies.

Insights from UK’s and Germany’s EHEA Memberships for Rational-Choice Neo-Institutionalism in Europeanization in Both Countries

The thematic analysis of the expert interviews and official communications of key Bologna stakeholders in both UK members in the EHEA and Germany has revealed different patterns in *rationalizing* organizational decisions with regard to continuing EHEA membership presently which is reflective of the wider Europeanization strategies and reasons for them in both case studies.

Voices from the UK

EWNI

Continuing EHEA membership of EWNI is driven predominantly by the English administration and is explained by the stakeholders predominantly in terms of power-related incentives but also economic profit incentives, both of which are related to HE specifically and to Westminster’s wider politics of internationalization. Historical neo-institutionalism serving as a contextual background in this discussion (rather than the focus) dictates the need to appeal to the legacy of English imperialism. Choosing not to be actively involved in the Europeanization driven by the EU historically (Crescenzi et al., 2018) would preamp us from being taken by surprise by what a representative from Guild HE shared:

“... we’ve always tried to use our engagement with the Bologna Process as a way of influencing them, rather than them influencing us ... it has historically felt as though more attention has been given to the structures,

and the processes than some of the ideology [promoting common identity] underpinning certainly the initial declaration" (A1).

The “us-them” distinction here refers to EWNI vs. the rest of the EHEA. Such a distinction and the idea of passively observing the developments in the EHEA with an opportunity to make EWNI’s voice heard if needed, is a common theme in the interviews. EWNI’s HE international strategy is an important pillar in the support of UK’s wider power politics of internationalization summarized well in the following extract from the *International Education Strategy* (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2021): “It is paramount that the government continues to develop the UK’s soft power globally.”

The rational choice of such a power position may also shed more light on the lack of interest in making any substantial changes in the HE sector in response to the BP, evident from prior research in the field in this context (e.g., Marquand & Scott, 2018). This reserved attitude to the EHEA is also present in the policy paper *International Education Strategy* (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2021), which is a key strategic document for driving HE development in the country. No explicit references are present to the BP or the EHEA in this document. Nevertheless, the BP does feature implicitly in this key document in the references to quality assurance and internationalization, and a mutually shaping relationship between HE politics and wider politics of internationalization is evident.

In addition to the power rationales for continuing EWNI’s EHEA membership presently, despite Brexit and leaving Erasmus+, economic motivations are also rationalized in the data. The representative from GuildHE also points out the economic advantages for EWNI in staying part of the EHEA, which is illustrative of similar opinions expressed by other interviewees, both in EWNI and Scotland. This partly consumerist position of EWNI is related first and foremost to student mobility which the EHEA facilitates beyond the Erasmus + Programme (e.g., in the form of other exchanges through partnership agreements and recognition frameworks):

“... it’s been more of an observer role for the UK [EWNI]... Stand back, watch, and see what happens, and take from it the bits that it’s particularly interested in ... what we would call, a bit-part player ... there are times when it’s better to do things collectively and to be seen to be a cooperative, interested player” (A2, representative of a key HE actor from Scotland)

It is also worth explaining further the earlier mentioned point about England’s administration driving the strategy of EWNI’s membership in the EHEA. First of all, the government official communications that were analyzed all find their origin in the central UK government which is driven by the English administration (Department for Education, 2019a, 2019b; Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2021; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2019). The headquarters of the other organizations whose official communications related to EWNI membership in the EHEA were reviewed (Table 2 above) are all located in England, which suggests more input and influence from English voices—Quality Assurance Agency in Gloucester, Universities UK International and the Association of Colleges both in London (Association of Colleges, 2022; Quality Assurance Agency, 2022; Universities UK, 2022). A key HE actor from Scotland summarizes well who drives the EWNI membership in the EHEA which is presented as “the United Kingdom” on the EHEA website (EHEA, 2022e):

“... historically, the UK has a place [in the EHEA], but it’s actually ‘UK-England’” (A2).

England’s leading role in the HE policy-making in EWNI may also serve as a hypothetical justification for the focus of prior literature on the BP in the UK specifically on England (e.g., Sin, 2012; Sin & Saunders, 2014). This would also resonate with the power dynamics in policy-making in the UK beyond HE (Gallacher & Raffe, 2012).

Furthermore, the HE sector of N. Ireland had a hard time accepting Brexit and a resulting departure from Erasmus+ (Koch, 2021), similar to Scotland, as explained below. However, while Scotland’s voice in the EHEA becomes clear due to its separate EHEA

membership, the voice of N. Ireland gets lost in specifically EHEA discussion in the context of N. Ireland's joint membership with England and Wales. While its voice seems to be subdued in the official communications that have been analyzed, the interview data bring it up, opposing it as well as Wales' voice to that of England with regard to the development of social justice in HE, which is part of the BP:

"In England, with the Office for Students, there is a baseline set of regulations to get on the register, and you either comply or you don't comply ... Whereas in the Nations, that's the opposite, we believe that that's not enough. You need to help people to improve" (A2, a key HE actor from Scotland).

These issues bring us right back to where we started the discussion in this section—England's administration leading role in the EWNI membership and the power ambitions at stake. Evidently, they are relevant not just with regard to the EHEA context broadly but are linked to BP management within the UK, too. In addition, the question of Wales' separate seat in the EHEA has been raised but this has not led to any changes to the EWNI membership:

"Occasionally, the Welsh will say, can we not get our own seat on this as well?. Or, how best can we have Welsh issues raised within this process? And that answer is never really fully addressed, partly because there is a limited number of seats or places that a country can have within the process" (A4, representative of the Scottish Government).

Scotland

Scotland's opportunity to get their "foot in the door at the beginning" by securing a separate membership in the EHEA was likely due to "Scotland's very distinct education system" (A4, representative of the Scottish Government). Its membership is more uniform in the EHEA due to having one nation in it, unlike the power imbalance between the nations in EWNI, as discussed above. Among different reasons, Scotland's continuing EHEA membership is rationalized, first and foremost, by the need to mend its relationship with Europe inevitably caused by Brexit, both in HE and beyond, with "the European Union: protecting Scotland's place in Europe" being set out as a key objective in the *Scotland's International Framework* (Scottish Government, 2017). The BP is not explicitly mentioned in this overarching framework which covers all areas of policy, but European cooperation in education and research is emphasized.

The representatives from the Scottish stakeholders that were interviewed believe strongly in the value of the BP for the development of Scottish HE which shares a lot in common with the HE in other European countries, and they recognize that the link to the EHEA now is particularly valuable to demonstrate to the rest of the EHEA the value of the BP and European connections for Scotland. Here are a couple of illustrative quotes to evidence this:

"... the Scots have always loved Bologna. They've always wanted to be very engaged with it. They hate the fact that we left the European Union, therefore I can imagine them wanting to get even more engaged [in the EHEA] in the future ... Scotland would want to be part of the European community. So, anything that's like that, it would want to be part of" (A1, representative from GuildHE).

"The Scottish higher education system is distinctly European, in a way that the UK system is perhaps not as much ... the EHEA is a way for us to maintain that European connection. We ... have a fear or a concern being outside of the EU ... being outside of the EU, we risk being sidelined as the EU seeks to harmonize more of its own higher education policies. Being in the EHEA, while it's not the same as that, it does provide a bit of a link. It's at least something to keep us in the loop as to what's going on ... Within Scotland, we have always taken note of our specific presence within the EHEA and the Bologna Process. So, Scotland has been probably a little bit more active than other devolved governments (A4, representative of the Scottish Government).

Apparently, Scotland does not hold a strong leading role within the EHEA due to finding itself in the circumstances whereby it has to do a catching-up job. The harmonization of HE policy in

the EU that the representative of the Scottish Government mentions above refers to the well-known European Education Area initiative limited to EU countries only (Kushnir & Brooks, 2022). The motivation to staying in tune with the developments in EU HE is vital for Scotland to mend and sustain the established European connections:

“Scotland’s higher education institutes have the greatest proportional number of European staff and students there than the rest of the UK. We have, I think, a greater number of research collaborations per head with Europe than other institutions in the UK” (A4, representative of the Scottish Government).

Despite this interest in the BP in Scotland and its resulting supposedly equal role in Bologna, the connections to EWNI and a degree of influence of the English administration in the Scottish membership should not be overlooked. Evidently, the interconnectedness between HE stakeholders for EWNI and Scotland is in their structure—while a lot of them would have a Scotland branch, such as, for example, NUS-Scotland associated with NUS-UK, some organizations are universal for the whole of the UK, such as Guild HE (EHEA, 2022a).

Voices from Germany

Germany plays a much more active role in the EHEA, according to the interviews conducted, which also resonates with the literature review presented above (e.g., Marquand & Scott, 2018). What this literature does not address and what this study provides is an account of how the rationale for Germany’s membership in the EHEA is negotiated by key Bologna stakeholders and how it fits with Germany’s wider Europeanization agenda. This study highlights that while Germany is not the same kind of driver of the developments in the EHEA as in the past, it leads to many issues and all of its stakeholders express Germany’s sense of responsibility for Europe and its HE. What regards HE, key German Bologna organizations’ rationales for actively supporting Germany’s EHEA membership presently include cooperation in HE with the new emphasis not only on the structural aspects of HE but more importantly—the values of democracy and academic freedom and integrity; as well as benefit-drawing for the improvement of German HE and economy. In addition to these specifically HE-related incentives, there are two wider incentives related to promoting political stability in the region.

There is a very strong theme of a sense of responsibility for promoting the politics of cooperation and peace-keeping and peace-building in the European region and around it. All representatives from the Bologna organizations in Germany who were interviewed expressed this idea in one way or another. It is striking to see how Bologna organizations use this reason to reinforce the importance of their commitment to the EHEA. For instance, a representative of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research states:

“... we think that the EHEA can facilitate ... exchanges of opinions, of science. And let people meet with each other, so that they can’t imagine anymore to have war with each other. In a way, it is more than just education. It’s also a peace policy” (B1).

The link between education and peace is so timely in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, which is what the interviewee implied, although the interview took place just before the full-scale war on Ukraine was launched on February 24, 2022. The ideas expressed still remain relevant. Germany’s Bologna actors’ choice to view and use Germany’s EHEA’s membership as a tool for enacting Germany’s sense of responsibility for developing cooperation and friendship in the region is in line with the literature on Germany’s evolving leading role specifically in the EU (Aggestam & Hyde-Price, 2020; Daehnhardt, 2022; Schoeller, 2019). While this literature is limited to the discussions of the EU, the ethos of Germany’s aspiration to support Europeanization in the region evident from this literature runs in parallel with the findings from this study on Germany’s utilization of its EHEA membership as a way to promote Europeanization in the EHEA. Although in the EHEA’s case, Germany’s Europeanization acquires a new meaning—wider

cooperation and friendship zone generation, and a clear bridge between developments in HE cooperation and wider politics. Education can never be neutral—it is always political (Marshall & Scribner, 1991), and it is not surprising that there is a mutually shaping relationship between HE and the context in which it operates, as discussed extensively by the representatives from key Bologna stakeholders in Germany as well as evident in their official communications. For instance, unlike in *the International Education Strategy* in the EWNI (Department for Education and Department for International Trade, 2021) and *Scotland's International Framework* (Scottish Government, 2017), the EHEA is explicitly mentioned in *the Internationalization Strategy* for Germany (Federal Ministry of Education & Research, 2017, p. 64), emphasizing academic mobility and resulting cooperation in the European region as the drivers of “stability and peace in the regions involved.”

The most turbulent times since WWII that have arrived in Europe and other smaller crises that have recently occurred have inspired another aspect of Germany's wider politics of cooperation using its EHEA membership as a tool for promoting the politics of friendship and creating a ring of friends specifically around Germany—for Germany's safety:

“We are located in the middle of Europe, and international cooperation is becoming more important every year” (B2, key HE actor in Germany).

What concerns HE in particular, Bologna stakeholders in Germany choose to be active in the EHEA to drive cooperation in HE in the region with the new emphasis not only on the structural aspects of HE, which is the focus of prior literature on the topic (e.g., Gareis & Broekel, 2022; Turner, 2019) but more importantly, the values of democracy and academic freedom and integrity:

“... what used to be the core of Bologna: increasing mobility, introducing study cycles ... in that sense Bologna has become less important. It is becoming more important in other regards and we're coming to that: fundamental values, academic freedom, and now, of course, the war on Ukraine - we would rather see the importance of the Bologna Process in this area now as a forum for exchange” (B4, Rectors' Conference).

Last but not least, a benefit-drawing theme is also present in the responses obtained—EHEA membership is used by the key stakeholders to improve German HE specifically and as a result, its economy, too:

“... it's also easier, when you have a problem, to call someone in another country and ask him, how do you solve the problem?” (B1, Federal Ministry of Education and Research).

“Europeanization is very important for Germany on an economic level. That's also an education thing, that's why there's a lot of interest ... they [central government] were like, we're going to have this huge European thing [the BP] and if we don't do this all together, then we are going to be left behind. And so, the whole process [the BP] was used to give motivation to the federal ministers to really do some reforms” (B5, Free Association of Students' Unions).

While benefit-drawing for HE improvement through implementing different action points of the BP is a typical theme in prior literature on the BP in Germany (e.g., Bucker & Woodruff, 2008; Turner, 2019), viewing this as part of wider economic benefit and, more importantly, a method of governance shift has not been a focus in the literature. The last quote is a powerful example of how Germany's EHEA members were used by German central government as a power tool for them to establish a form of control by coordinating the work of the independent federal ministries in the area of HE. The BP is also acknowledged as a driver for “promoting higher education reform in Germany” on the national level in the press release of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (2021), although the gravity of what is meant in this official communication can only be realized when put in the context of the discussion with the interviewee mentioned above. The scope of these coordinated and harmonized national reforms had not previously been possible in the fragmented policy context of German federalism (Toens, 2009). Such references to the past events illustrate the importance of the historical background

for shaping the rationalization of the EHEA membership in Germany (and the UK) for strategic purposes by key Bologna organizations.

Rational-Choice Neo-Institutionalism in Europeanization in the UK and Germany

The above discussion has demonstrated that continuing EHEA memberships in both UK regions and Germany is a rational and strategic choice of their key stakeholders. For instance, Germany's assigning of a strategic importance of its EHEA membership for wider political purposes represents Germany's rational choice to participate in a form of Europeanization which has increasingly meant unity seeking on the continent.

The sociological strand of neo-institutionalism which, partly, informs the methodological decision to rely on individuals as they are integral cogs in the make-up of organizations, has dictated the way that the voices that represent the findings above are treated. The voices that this article relies on are treated as illustrative of the views of the key Bologna organizations they represent, as they are also supported by similar ideas in the official communications that were analyzed. However, it should be acknowledged that, due to the organic and dynamic nature of organizations (Peters, 2019), other opinions may exist or be in the process of emerging.

The term "rationalization" used throughout undoubtedly appeals to rational-choice neo-institutionalism whereby organizations rationally choose certain strategies and justify them accordingly. The findings above have confirmed the phenomenon of "differentiated Europeanization" (Stubb, 1996, p. 283) between Germany and the UK, and within the UK, which is not surprising. More importantly, the findings presented above have suggested that Europeanization is transformed into a space for (rational) meaning-making by the Bologna stakeholders in both case studies, and the EHEA membership is an indispensable tool in this meaning-making process. EHEA memberships serve as one of those "European resources," in Graziano and Vink's terms (2017, p. 40), that national-level stakeholders utilize to support their political ideologies and strategies.

Conclusion

While both the UK and Germany are among the founders of the EHEA, and HE actors in both countries express the need to play a role in the region, their ways of doing so are different. Germany, despite its federal structure and in line with its leading role in the Europeanization in the EU and beyond in general (Caporaso, 2021), views its EHEA membership, first and foremost, as a tool for Europeanization as a process of generating and maintaining political stability in the region. The start of the full-scale war in Ukraine seems to have rejuvenated the forgotten peace-building narrative (Polyakova, 2016) of the German vision of Europeanization, as demonstrated by how German Bologna stakeholders rationalize Germany's EHEA membership in the current context. This sense of responsibility for the region and the positioning of the EHEA as a platform for inspiring international friendship, in general, is quite unique to Germany. None of the UK two members share this vibe and such a leadership approach to the development of the European region. EWNI's approach to the Europeanization linked to its EHEA membership is that of a former empire—willingness to maintain international connections, external influence and benefit from this while not being a leader. This approach seems to be in line with UK's international politics, driven by England, in its more recent past (Crescenzi et al., 2018). Thus, out of the three memberships analyzed, EWNI's rationalization of its EHEA membership is the most focused on internationalization specifically within HE, although a contribution of it to UK's international links, in general, is recognized and the importance of European cooperation as one of EWNI's international connections post-Brexit is valued. For Scotland which would have generally and strongly preferred to remain in the EU (Scottish Government, 2017), the EHEA is an obvious

tool for its wider politics of Europeanization which acquires the meaning of mending post-Brexit EU ties.

The above has highlighted the paramount role of organizations in shaping (forms of) Europeanization which has been discussed with reference to the EU and post-EU space. Despite a high degree of rigidity of organizations, their dynamic nature situated in the wider political context which is both shapes and is represented in these organizations (Peters, 2019). Indeed, the interlocking economic, political, security, humanitarian, and other crises that the European region has recently faced (Kushnir, 2021), followed by the recent war in Ukraine, and how these crises have been experienced internally in Germany and the UK (EWNI and Scotland) has prompted different rationales, unique to each EHEA member, in HE policy-making and related politics. This article serves as an important stepping-stone to the investigation of the current politics of the EHEA and its signatories.

Author Biography

Dr. Iryna Kushnir is currently a Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Trent University. Dr. Kushnir's interdisciplinary research combines the following main areas: higher education policy and sociology, European integration, and social justice. She is particularly interested in the higher education policy and politics of the European Higher Education Area. Her interdisciplinary approach has led to empirical and theoretical contributions, which reveal how education policy on one hand, and Europeanization processes and post-Soviet transition on the other hand are interrelated and mutually shape one another. A wider societal impact of Dr Kushnir's work is in co-establishing and co-developing the Ukrainian Education Research Association which has become the biggest national research association in Ukraine and a hub for education research and quality. She is also the author of the monograph "The Bologna Reform in Ukraine: Learning Europeanization in the Post-Soviet Context" with Emerald Publishing Ltd and one of the reviewers of the 4th edition of BERA Research Ethics Guidelines to recommend revisions for the new edition.

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Data Availability Statement

The dataset with interview transcripts, generated and analysed during the current study, is available in the Research Data Archive of Nottingham Trent University, at <https://doi.org/10.17631/RD-2022-0001-DDOC>

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