

Constructed World Culture Instruments for European Higher Education Area Global Diffusion

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Abstract

Global educational reforms and policy trends suggest a growing convergence in educational systems worldwide, often attributed to the culturally embedded nature of nation-states and world-society models. However, in this article, we argue that these explanations are insufficient to fully account for the global diffusion of certain policies, as they often overlook the influential role of powerful actors in global policy dissemination. We analyse the European Bologna Process (BP) as a global case, highlighting instruments devised by the EHEA actors to actively promote BP reforms and philosophies worldwide. Drawing on World Culture Theory and analysing 25 BP documents, we argue that education policy diffusion occurs because of a well-coordinated structure and established instruments by policy actors for global policy dissemination.

Keywords: Global education policy, world culture theory, Bologna Process, policy diffusion, policy instruments

Introduction

In this article, we examine the instruments designed to facilitate the global appeal and diffusion of the European Bologna Process (BP) reforms, and guiding principles. The BP, which launched the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for the harmonisation and improvement of higher education (HE) systems, as well as the strengthening of international connections (EHEA, 2023), has had a profound impact on HE in Europe and beyond over the

past two decades. The EHEA exemplifies regional initiatives involving various actors in the governance of education, particularly with regards to HE harmonisation within Europe (Eta, 2018). The operational dynamics of the EHEA involves joint formulation and agreement on objectives, line of actions and policies at the European level, which are then implemented in national HE systems (Paris communique, 2018).

While initially focused on Europe and the facilitation of a European identity (Kushnir, 2016), the BP's documents and scientific literature reveal the emergence of a new discourse regarding its 'external' or 'global' dimension. Expressions such as 'world-wide degree of attraction' (Bologna Declaration, 1999), 'the Bologna Process in a global setting' (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007; Zgaga, 2007), 'the external dimension of the Bologna Process' (Bergen Communique, 2005), and 'the Bologna Process goes global' (European University Association, 2019) are commonly used in this context. Initially, the expression, the *external dimension* was used in the early BP documents, but it was expanded upon in the 2007 report, entitled 'Looking out: The Bologna Process in a global setting. On the "External Dimension" of the Bologna Process' (Zgaga, 2007) due to the observation that the phrase produces certain paradoxes and implies an 'us' versus 'them' approach. Both expressions, 'global dimension', and 'external dimension' continue to be used interchangeably in the literature (including this article) to refer to articulations of the relationships between the EHEA and the surrounding world (Zgaga, 2019).

Recent scholarship on the BP has focused on addressing the questions of to what extent and how the external dimension of the BP goals has been realised (Klemenčič 2019; Mngo 2019; Zgaga 2019). Several studies have examined the influence of the EHEA on other regions worldwide including the Asian-Pacific region (Chao, 2011; Pohlenz & Niedermeier, 2019), Africa (Alemu 2022; Eta & Mngo, 2021; Mekonnen et al 2022), and Latin America (Figuerola, 2010; Gacel-Ávila 2011) which Chao (2011, 102) describes as the 'Bolognazation of global

higher education’. In a recent study, (Eta & Mngo, 2021) examined the diffusion of the BP and demonstrated that between 2000 and 2008, 23 African countries were already implementing Bologna-inspired reforms in conjunction with continental harmonisation efforts initiated by the African Union. Various authors have also highlighted the influence of the BP on national systems outside the EHEA, such as Cameroon (Eta, 2018; Eta & Vubo, 2016), Ethiopia (Hindeya, 2014), Senegal (Diop, 2016), Canada (King, 2019), Israel (Zahavi, 2019), New Zealand (Shannon, Doidge & Holland, 2019) and Burundi (Provini, 2017).

In comparative policy studies, the increasing emergence of global trends in educational reforms, referred to as the ‘globalisation of education policy spaces’ by Verger, Parcerisa, and Fontdevila (2019, 6) has been observed. The World Culture Theory provides an explanatory framework for these trends, indicating a growing convergence in HE policy tools, discourses, structures and curricula, and forms of governance worldwide (Carney, Rappleye & Silova, 2012; Wiseman, Astiz, & Baker, 2014; Verger, Parcerisa, & Fontdevila, 2019). Numerous studies on education convergence have explored the diffusion and influence of international, and regional policies on national and local education systems. Examples of such internationalised/regionalised goals impacting national education systems include the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, UNESCO Education for All goals, United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the BP. Extensive research has also delved into understanding why national systems adopt global policies. Reasons range from meeting international standards (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014), legitimising contested national reforms (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000; Och, 2006), fear of being left behind on a presumed global model, to addressing home-based education challenges (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006) when local solutions and resources are limited.

Despite the significance of these lines of inquiry, they primarily suggest that globalised or regionalised policies naturally flow due to the embeddedness of national systems within the

global and regional system, as well as the interests of national systems to engage globally. The role of the global and regional actors in facilitating the diffusion and adoption of these policies has received little attention, creating a gap that this article seeks to address by examining constructed instruments for the global diffusion of the BP. In this article, we argue that the diffusion of education policies and models occur due to a well-coordinated structure that enables the global spread of such policies. To illustrate this argument, we focus on the case of the European BP and analyse the instruments constructed to facilitate the global expansion of the reforms and philosophies beyond the boundaries of the EHEA. The focus here is on the instruments constructed to support global diffusion of the BP, rather than their actual implementation and assessment, enhancing our understanding of how education policies become global.

The article begins by contextualising the World Culture Theory as our theoretical framework, helping explain the dynamics of global policy diffusion in education. Next, we explain the methodology, emphasising the data and analytical approach employed. The subsequent analysis examines the instruments constructed to facilitate the global expansion of the EHEA.

Explaining EHEA Global Outreach through the World Culture Theory

The global diffusion of the BP aligns with the world culture debates on converging educational systems (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Verger, 2014). Comparative policy studies employ theoretical approaches like world culture and policy borrowing, with the former emphasising macro-level convergence and the latter examining local enactment of global policies, highlighting divergences (Carney, Rappleye & Silova, 2012; Verger, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014), but also acknowledging some convergence in name (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

From the World Culture perspective, the convergence of educational systems stems from the universalistic nature of education and the culturally embedded nature of the modern nation-state (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). It identifies commonalities across systems gravitating towards a global/western model, occurring through a top-down process where new policies are developed in world society – a network of international organisations and actors – and later adopted by individual nation states (Meyer et al. 1997). The argument is that educational standardisation worldwide ‘lies in the characteristics of the contemporary world system’, rather than being solely a response to the political, economic and social characteristics of individual nation-states (Meyer, Ramirez, Robinson & Boli-Bennet, 1977, 255). World-society models define, legitimise, and influence the identities, structures, and behaviours of nation-states in similar ways (Meyer et al., 1997).

According to World Culture theorists, the adoption of similar policies, such as the BP, which are often associated with Western values of modernity, stems from the pressure on national governments to demonstrate to the world that they are building a modern state (Meyer et al., 1997). These processes are institutionalised in organisations such as the World Bank, the OECD, UNESCO and parts of the UN system, international, regional and non-governmental organisations (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000, 117), leading to a perceived ‘global sameness’ (Silova & Rappleye, 2015) in policies and practices among countries with diverse national attributes (Chabbott & Ramirez, 2000). From a macro standpoint, the global diffusion of BP reforms by the 47 active signatory countries, along with alignment by non-signatory countries (Eta & Mngo, 2021) signals educational system convergence due to the ‘semantics of reform’ (Schriewer, 2000) pointing to this global sameness.

However, worth noting is that policies do not spread globally simply because they are powerful; powerful actors promoting them play a crucial role (Steiner-Khamisi, 2012). Legitimation pressure compels nation-states to adopt certain policies and coordinated effort by

regional and international actors in education governance to develop instruments facilitating their dissemination. These ‘scripts’ are promoted and transmitted through various instruments including intergovernmental conferences, international standards, and epistemic communities (Wiseman, Astiz & Bakar, 2014). These scripts are also institutionalised through ‘associations, journals, newsletters, list-servers, and conferences’ (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004, 2015). Conferences play a significant role in transmitting, circulating, consolidating, legitimatising and diffusing ideas (Chisholm, 2007, 296) emphasising the importance of various forms of communication in policy diffusion.

Methodological Approach

Using official EHEA documents as source of data, this article examines constructed instruments that supported the global diffusion of the EHEA policies. To be concluded in this analysis, the EHEA documents had to satisfy three conditions: originate from the EHEA website, mention the external dimension of the BP, the BP in a global setting, internationalisation of the BP, or similar concepts and express action plans and roadmap for realising them. Numerous documents are available on the EHEA website, spanning from the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration to present day, providing an extensive record of the development of the EHEA. In Table 1, we present a selection of the 25 documents, obtained from the EHEA website, meeting the inclusion criteria for the period 1998-2022.

Table I: Document types used as data: 1998-2022

The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was used to analyse the disposition of official discourses on the construction of the global dimension of the EHEA. We analysed the

instruments used in the construction of the global dimension as framed in policy text through identification (relationship with oneself), action (relations with others, action on others and power), and representation (knowledge and control over situations) (Fairclough, 2003). Text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis, which allows us in this paper, to highlight the interactive processes of meaning making with regards to social structures, practices, and the social agents (Fairclough, 2003). Discourse, as located in social constructionism, is a form of social practice through which meanings are constructed dialogically in the community (Saarinen, 2007). Hence, discourse dialectically constructs social practice and highlights relations and factors that determine whether a specific discourse becomes successful or not (Fairclough, 2003).

The analysis started with a critical reading of the 25 documents for an overview of their content with a focus on identifying the terminologies, wordings, and argumentation (Fairclough, 2010). During the second phase of reading, content related specially to the instruments to push for and achieve a global outreach of the EHEA was extracted and exported into a word document for analysis. The content of the documents was read again and analysed, with an eye on World Culture elements as well as representation, action, and identification to highlight the instruments used for EHEA global outreach which we present in the subsequent section.

Instruments for EHEA Global Expansion

Our analysis highlights various instruments in EHEA global diffusion, discussed under three main themes. These include efforts aimed at enhancing the EHEA from within, its enhancement through established external connections and collaboration, and establishing dedicated infrastructure and organizational units for EHEA internationalization. Collectively, these

actions contribute to global dissemination of the EHEA guiding principles, potentially leading to its adoption beyond the EHEA and fostering convergence among these systems, even if nominally. The analysis, focusing on the concepts of identification, action and representation reveals ideological elements at play in the development of the instruments.

EHEA Enhancement from within

For the EHEA to attract interest from other parts of the world and establish partnerships with different regions and countries on topics of mutual interests, concrete steps were necessary to enhance its attractiveness from within. This involves a kind of identification of areas where convergence and harmonisation within the EHEA can be promoted from within, given that divergence in international education policy often poses challenges (Carney, Rappleye & Silova, 2012; Verger, 2014). The EHEA's attractiveness has also been significant in elevating its status as a powerful policy actor, as policies derive influence when wielded by influential actors (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). The aspiration of the EHEA to become attractive was evident from the early stages of the process, as articulated in the Bologna Declaration (1999), which stated an explicit aim to increase the 'international competitiveness of the European system of higher education' because:

The vitality and efficiency of any civilisation can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries. We need to ensure that the European higher education system acquires a world-wide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary cultural and scientific traditions.

This objective was further emphasised in the Prague Communiqué (2001) and the Berlin Communiqué (2003), both of which included a subsection on ‘Promoting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area’. The focus on international competitiveness discussed within this subsection was primarily oriented towards enhancing the EHEA from within. Also, in the early EHEA policy documents, the discourse regarding its international attractiveness was more inward looking, aimed at attracting others to the EHEA. However, a significant shift occurred in 2005, particularly evident in the Bergen Communiqué (2005, 5), as the discourse became more outward-looking. This transition was notably reflected in the Bergen Communiqué subsection titled ‘The attractiveness of the EHEA and cooperation with other parts of the world’ which emphasised that:

We look forward to enhancing the understanding of the Bologna Process in other continents by sharing our experiences of reform processes with neighbouring regions [...]. We ask the Follow-up Group to elaborate and agree on a strategy for the external dimension.

The last sentence of the quote exemplifies action-oriented language used throughout the documents and provides a clear directive to the Bologna Follow-Up group, urging them to create instruments to expand the reach of the BP beyond the EHEA. This call illustrates Wiseman et al.’s (2014) argument regarding the influential role of coordinated international actors in education governance, particularly in developing instruments that promote policy dissemination.

The EHEA sought to achieve its goals through strategic actions involving identification, action, and representation. This positioning portrays the EHEA as forward thinking and committed to modernising HE, fostering a shared purpose and identity. For instance, the

adoption of a three-cycle system aimed to enhance degree comparability and recognition within Europe. Introducing the ECTS and the Diploma Supplement aimed to support credit validation, promoting educational progression, recognition, graduate employability, and mobility across European universities. This is crucial for the EHEA global appeal:

The European reform process needs to continue a coherent implementation of the Bologna Process. The Internal and External Dimensions are interlinked. [...] For the External Dimension of the Bologna Process to succeed, and to enhance Europe's attractiveness and competitiveness, it is of the utmost importance that all the objectives and instruments of the EHEA, e.g. the new degree structure and the development of qualifications framework, quality assurance, ECTS or Diploma Supplement, be implemented across all Bologna countries in a coherent and compatible way (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, 2)

For the EHEA to be significantly impactful, it needed to be 'institutionalised'. This entailed specific conditions and support structures, including comprehensive European representation. However, determining 'what Europe' to consider, as Zgaga (2007, 1) pointed out, was a challenge due to distinctions between 'EU-25' and 'EU-45'. To ensure the effectiveness of EHEA cooperation, it was vital to prevent the emergence of 'A group' and 'B group' within the BP, as noted by Zgaga.

An institutional structure to support international coordination efforts of national HE institutions was also deemed necessary. Across the documents, there were recommendations concerning actions to be taken in the establishment of a dedicated office responsible for promoting national education institutions internationally, their academic programme,

scholarships for international students and information on the overall benefits of studying, conducting research and teaching within the EHEA. It was noted that:

In the overwhelming majority of cases, national governments out-sourced this task to specialised organisations. In countries where there was already an established “internationalisation agency” for the administration of scholarship programmes and similar measures, this organisation was usually entrusted with the development and implementation of the promotional campaign. [...]. In countries without such structures, new entities were set up (BFUG, 2009, 7).

To attract academic mobility and facilitate free movement of those they sought to attract, collaboration with other national institutions responsible for diplomatic relations was identified as crucial. Therefore, cooperation with relevant ministries was necessary to streamline processes such as ‘the granting of visas’, ‘social security coverage and granting of work permits’ (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, 4). In line with World Culture theorisation, such common measures in the development of the BP stemmed from the collective efforts of national governments among the EHEA signatories to prove to the rest of the world that they are building a modern state (Meyer et al., 1997).

EHEA Enhancement through Existing External Connections and Collaborations

In advancing the global dimension of the EHEA, there was a profound reliance on existing connections based on cultural, colonial, regional ties and collaborations. This reliance and identification were enabled by shared norms, practices and institutions, potentially leading to convergence (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). The action-driven strategic approach assumed the BP resonated with other countries and regions across

the world, evidenced by the surging requests for EHEA membership. Zgaga (2007, 35) cautions that ‘the appeal ceases to exist if there is no *relation*’. Extending BP reforms beyond the EHEA involved recognizing the invaluable advantage of nurturing and leveraging these existing relations.

Membership extension of the BP to countries outside the EU that are signatories to the European Cultural Convention of 1954 was one way for EHEA to enable full European representation and global expansion based on existing connection through a shared cultural institution. This convention aims to foster cultural cooperation in Europe while facilitating the mobility and exchange of people, and cultural goods. Its identification and incorporation into the Berlin Communiqué (2003, 8) opened doors for numerous countries to become part of the BP, further extending the global diffusion of the EHEA, and contributing to the adoption of similar policies around the world. Starting with Liechtenstein, Croatia, and Turkey in 2001, this clause ushered in a wave of new members including Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, and the Republic of Macedonia in 2003, followed by Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine in 2005, the Republic of Montenegro in 2007, Kazakhstan in 2010 and Belarus in 2015. Additionally, non-EU countries such as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, joined hands with the EU member states (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) to signed the 1999 Bologna Declaration.

Existing connections based on colonial ties also played a crucial role in expanding and introducing the BP philosophy beyond the EHEA because as Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez (1997) and Meyer & Ramirez (2000) note, these countries are already culturally embedded. This existing colonial relationships and collaboration in teaching and research that had

developed overtime and the identification of shared commonalities between European and former colonial institutions facilitated the introduction of the BP in the colonies. This was due to the fact that:

most of the universities in countries which were former colonies of Europe were patterned on the institutions in the respective colonising country. In Europe these countries are mainly the UK, France, Spain and Portugal. The former colonies, mostly developing countries, are mainly in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific (cited in Zgaga, 2007, 47).

Regional ties were also used for the global diffusion of the EHEA. A case of such regional ties is the existing Euro-Mediterranean connection which also highlights the cultural embeddedness of national states (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). It is common knowledge that most countries of the European side of the Mediterranean have EU membership and receive substantial EU support for diverse education and training initiatives. These initiatives were implemented through projects such as Tempus, and the Cards and Tacis covering regions like the Western Balkans, East Europe, and Central Asia. The Euro-Mediterranean connection played a pivotal role in the signing of the Catania Declaration in 2006 in Italy where Ministers of Education from 12 Mediterranean countries (Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Jordan, Malta, Morocco, Slovenia, Spain, Tunisia, and Turkey) came together. The declaration, which was celebrated as ‘further proof of the dissemination of the Bologna spirit’ (Zgaga, 2007, 40-41), also highlighted the importance of cultural interconnectedness, shared norms, and institutions in further strengthening the global diffusion of the EHEA.

Acknowledging the significance of expanding the external dimension through regional ties, the EHEA actors focused on identifying key partners and areas of cooperation across the different regions of the globe. Different sub-regional working groups were established to foster closer relations with specific regions such as Asia, Africa, and the Americas and ensured consistency in the messages the different EHEA working groups conveyed by the various working groups to world regions. These sub-groups engaged in a mapping exercise to identify the regional initiatives, relevant organisations, upcoming events, and contact persons. (Global Policy Dialogue, 2022a). This approach allowed the EHEA to tailor its engagement to the diverse countries within the region, further strengthening its global influence, and subsequent adoption of its guiding philosophy.

As the EHEA extended its reach, it emphasised the principle of ‘cooperation based on partnership’ at the international, national, or regional levels, with HE institutions and organisations (BFUG, 2009, 15). Although European HE institutions were recognised as key promoters of the EHEA, shared cultural norms and practices with governments, institutions of HE, national and European associations, students, staff and international organisations and institutions (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007) was necessary to create a more profound EHEA global reach. This cooperation, through the involvement and representation of external actors in the production and dissemination of EHEA information and documents, aligned with strategies for global outreach. As already noted, world culture processes are institutionalised in concrete organisations, contributing to global sameness in policies (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). For example, inviting organisations such as ACA, Council of Europe, EI, ENQA, ESU, EUA, EURASHE, European Commission, and UNESCO-CEPES (BFUG, 2009) to comment on the European HE global report helped equip these organisations with relevant information to promote the EHEA while institutionalising the EHEA within these

organisations. At the European level, the EHEA was also institutionalised within the European Union, the Council of Europe as well as the Nordic Council of Ministers who were the primary actors in promoting the EHEA (BFUG, 2009).

Furthermore, Cooperation was also extended to engagements between EHEA and non-EHEA in the planning of the BPF and the Global Policy Dialogue (GPD) and HE events in other countries and regions. For example, Ministers from 38 non-EHEA countries were invited to suggest key themes for the 2020 GPD held in Rome (Global Policy Dialogue, 2019). This extensive external representation and involvement in the GDP highlighted a commitment to global dialogue and contributed to the dissemination of the EHEA philosophy to these countries.

The alignment of the BP objectives with the goals of other organisations played a vital role in enhancing the resonance of the EHEA and its institutionalisation within these organisations. This alignment was particularly relevant to HE reforms and the mobility and recognition of qualification lines of action. Initiatives such as the Tempus programme, supported by the European Commission, provided a platform to foster the EHEA internationalisation in regions such as the Western Balkans, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa with approximately €60m annually (BFUG, 2009). Moreover, Tempus also

provides the opportunity to discuss higher education reforms and the implementation of reforms in partner countries, latest developments in the Bologna Process, and good practices in areas of common interest. Coordinated by the National Tempus Offices, a policy initiative was launched at the beginning of 2008 to set up teams of reform

experts who will become a pool of expertise in key policy areas and support progress toward the Lisbon and Bologna objectives (BFUG, 2009, 16),

In terms of mobility, the BP line of action to enhance mobility of students and staff aligned with the Erasmus Mundus programme, which facilitated the establishment of ‘103 joint Master’s courses’ by EU HE institutions and ‘attracted non-European countries’ (BFUG, 2009, 16). To enhance the recognition of qualifications, the EHEA actors aligned this objective with UNESCO’s regional recognition conventions, the European Network of National Information Centres (ENIC) and the Network of National Academic Information Centres (NARIC) which are coordinated by the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO-CEPES. Also, the Bologna Policy Dialogue (2021) advocated for the ratification of the UNESCO Global Recognition convention. This initiative aimed to enhance the global visibility and representation of the EHEA and to foster dialogue with other regions. ENIC and NARIC were identified as the major European platforms for ‘the development of recognition policy and practice’ (BFUG; 2009, 18). This alignment and cooperation attracted countries outside the EHEA to identify with, participate and contribute substantially to different EHEA activities. The EHEA also aligned with the UNESCO/OECD ‘Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education’ because of ‘the meaningful role they give to all actors in higher education for quality assurance [...] even though different regions and countries have developed different approaches to quality assurance’ (BPF, 2012, 1-2). These collaborations with the multitude organisations (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) contributed to the supposed global diffusion and convergence at least in name, even if divergences would occur in the interpretation and implementation in different contexts.

Infrastructural and Organisational Units for EHEA Internationalisation

To enable the global spread of the EHEA, both infrastructural and organisational factors played a significant role. From an infrastructural perspective, logistical aspects such as different communication channels were put in place to support the EHEA global representation and internationalisation efforts. As already noted, communication is an important tool for global policy dissemination. The notion that information of the BP and the EHEA has been communicated and is circulating around the world was explicitly evident in the documents. However, it was also recognised that there was a necessity for the EHEA to disseminate comprehensive and tailored information to enhance the accuracy of the previously disseminated information and to rectify misconceptions about the BP, referred to as ‘Bologna myths’ (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, 3). This enables convergence and standardisation (Meyer, Ramirez, Rubinson & Boli-Bennet, 1977) of knowledge about the EHEA and a better representation across countries and cultures.

However, questions arose concerning actions to be taken with regards to the method, location, and timing of information dissemination. One strategic way was through seminars, and the invitation of non-European countries to be represented in the three Bologna seminars focusing on the external dimension of the BP. These seminars included a substantial 25% of participants from outside the EHEA. In particular, the third seminar for instance welcomed delegates from an additional 15 countries across the world, including: ‘Australia, Brazil, Cameroon, Canada, Costa Rica, Ghana, Japan, Kenya, Mexico, Mozambique, Pakistan, Tanzania, Thailand, Uganda and South Africa’ (Zgaga, 2007, 110). As Chisholm (2007) Wiseman, Astiz, and Bakar (2014), and Steiner-Khamsi (2015) observe, world cultural scripts are institutionalised and transmitted to nation states in conferences. The representation of non-European countries at the seminars with other Bologna signatory countries provided an opportunity for BP ideas and EHEA to be circulated and legitimised as a global phenomenon.

The information, which will later be transferred to the non-European countries, contribute to convergence in name and could lead to convergence in policy, if these countries aligned their educational systems to aspects of the BP.

World culture scripts are also circulated (Wiseman, Astiz and Bakar (2014) through other communication channels such as leaflets and websites. This was the case with the EHEA where multilingual communication through the design of official information leaflets describing key BP points in many non-European languages, as well as the development of web-based content specially designed for an international audience. There were also BP dissemination visits to non-EHEA countries with support from embassies of EHEA countries (BFUG, 2009) These actions led to the spread of similar ideas and norms across the world. This global spread of the EHEA was particularly noticeable with Web-based information engagement from 170 countries:

As the user statistics show, the Bologna website indeed attracts visitors from all over the world. In the period from 1 September 2008 until 31 December 2008, the website was visited 40,437 times by 26,200 users from 170 countries. About 18.5% of the visits came from outside the European Higher Education Area (BFUG, 2009, 4).

The establishment of organisational units with distinct and specific tasks also played a major role in the enhancement of the internationalisation goal of the EHEA.

The Bergen Communique (2005) that explicitly expressed the EHEA aspiration to collaborate with HE systems in other regions, share experiences of the BP, and foster dialogues with neighbouring regions, marked the initiation of mandated strategic planning and actions by various organisational units aimed at propelling the worldwide diffusion of the EHEA which

could lead to global sameness (Silova & Rappleye, 2015). Subsequent communiques between 2005-2015 further underscored the importance of international openness and the global expansion of European HEIs to be advocated by the various EHEA stakeholders. These actions encompassed ‘coordinated joint European actions’, ‘competition on a global scale’ which was ‘complemented by enhanced policy dialogue and cooperation based on partnership with other regions of the world’ in ‘Bologna Policy Fora, involving a variety of stakeholders’ (Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009, 4) and ‘co-chaired by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU country’ (Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009, 5). In essence:

Since 2005, the internationalisation of the EHEA has been supported by different reports, the BFUG working groups, a strategy for the external dimension of the Bologna Process and at a political level by four policy statements discussed in the so called «Bologna Policy Forum (BFUG, 2016b, 1).

In the post 2015 era, the EHEA has instituted other units to facilitate global policy dialogue with other regions across the world. These organisational units include the Advisory Group on International Cooperation and the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. The institutionalisation of these organisational units fosters a universalistic HE landscape where the circulation and diffusion of knowledge (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) transcend geographical boundaries are delved into further below.

A Strategy for the external dimension. This was commissioned by the European Ministers of HE in the Bergen Communiqué tasking the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to ‘elaborate and agree on a strategy for the external dimension’ (Bergen Communiqué, 2005). In 2007, following work by the BFUG, the strategy was adopted in London by the Bologna ministers

(London Communiqué, 2007). The strategy emphasised five core policy areas for action (1) improving information of the EHEA, (2), promoting European Higher Education to enhance its world-wide degree of attractiveness and competitiveness, (3) strengthening cooperation based on partnerships, (4), intensifying policy dialogue, (5) furthering recognition of qualifications (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007). In the London Communiqué (2007, 6), the ministers further tasked the BFUG to report by 2009 on the development of the implementation of the EHEA in a Global context strategy with attention to two priority areas:

First, to improve the information available about the EHEA, by developing the Bologna Secretariat website and building on EUA's Bologna Handbook; and second, to improve recognition.

The strategy was to contribute to actions that help the stakeholders think of the 'main tools and levers' such as 'a branding campaign, attractive (joint) Master programmes, broadening the scope of Erasmus Mundus programme, research opportunities, students' rights, smart immigration policy, improved recognition' (BFUG, 2006, 2).

The Bologna Policy Forum (BPF). The BPF was initiated as a result of the Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué in 2009. Its primary task was to foster international cooperation among regional HE areas and systems, thereby elevating the 'international prestige' of the BP and expanding the 'influence of the European Higher education Area' (Ritchie, 2018, 17). The EHEA served as a model for other regions to identify with and establish similar education areas and frameworks to modernise and enhance the quality HE (BPF, 2018). The BPF facilitated the sharing of best practices, enabling the EHEA became 'a

point of reference for harmonising national systems of Higher Education’ across the world (Ritchie, 2018, 17). Over the years, non-European countries were invited to be represented at the BPF as an instrument to increase the visibility of the EHEA as well as the possible adoption of its reforms by these countries. As observed, the number of non-European countries represented at the BPF increased from 2009-2018 from 15 countries in 2009 to 25 and 30 countries in 2010 and 2018 respectively as shown in Table II. Although discussions in the first BPF centred on how to develop cooperation and partnerships with other HE areas and countries of the world, the fourth BPF specifically mentioned the need for the EHEA to prioritise, reinforce and strengthen policy dialogue and cooperation with countries of the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, and MENAAS bordering the EHEA countries (EHEA, 2015), thereby expanding its reach and fostering commonalities within these diverse systems.

Table II: Non-European participating countries in the BPF: 2009, 2010, 2018

Advisory Group on International Cooperation: This group was proposed during the Yerevan meeting, recognising the EHEA potential to address global challenges (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). It was established by the BFUG to identify specific areas of cooperation with other world regions, thereby enhancing EHEA international dimension roadmap with non EHEA partners (BFUG, 2016a). This group’s composition ensured representation from a variety of European and international organisations and facilitated dialogue with other regional HE groupings including:

(International Association of Universities, European Association of International Educators, Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Union for the Mediterranean) and [...] ASEAN, the African Union, and the Organisation of Ibero-American States.

To fulfil its mandate, the Advisory Group employed a variety of working methods, including regular meetings, workshops, research seminars and regional conferences that engaged non-EHEA members (BFUF, 2016a).

Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. Established at the Vienna meeting in 2018, this group aimed to promote meaningful international and interregional dialogues (Global Policy Dialogue, 2020). Its mission included organising events, building trust through knowledge exchange and cooperation (Global Policy Dialogue, 2021) and facilitating interactions among EHEA countries, macro regions and organisations worldwide. Recognising the importance of raising awareness within the EHEA and among international partners, the coordination group organised different events (Global Policy Dialogue, 2020). Notably, the ‘Festival of Diplomacy’ event, held in Rome in 2019 contributed to the further dissemination of information about the EHEA. The EHEA in collaboration with EU Representation in Rome and the Italian Ministry of Education Universities and Research:

organised a meeting for the technical (culture and education) attachés of all the embassies present in Rome (139), and a ‘soirée’ for the Ambassadors, to present and discuss the Global Policy Forum and identify the topics the Forum might most usefully address. A flyer on the Bologna Process and the Global Policy Dialogue was distributed during both events. [...] about 30 persons from 25 other countries attended the meeting with the technical attachés. Several international organizations including the International Association of Universities were also represented. (Global Policy Dialogue, 2020, 9).

The infrastructure and organisational units have not only expanded the influence and visibility of the EHEA but also fostered a sense of global commonality through their joint actions and a focus on representation.

Conclusion

Regional and global trends in educational reforms have drawn attention to observations that educational systems are increasingly converging. While World Culture Theory is often used to explain this convergence, emphasising how nation-states' identities, structures and behaviours are culturally embedded and shaped by world-society models, ultimately leading to the adoption of similar policies worldwide, in this article, we argue that these explanations alone are insufficient to fully account for the global diffusion of certain policies, as they often overlook the role of powerful actors in global policy dissemination. Using the European BP as a case study, we highlight instruments devised by the EHEA actors to actively promote the global diffusion of the BP reforms. The instruments have been categorised under three main themes: EHEA enhancement from within, EHEA enhancement through existing external connections and collaborations and infrastructural and organisational units for EHEA internationalisation.

The EHEA's ambition for global appeal necessitated internal policy harmonisation across its member countries, including a standardised three-cycle system, credit system and qualification frameworks. This promoted convergence of systems, vital for EHEA's attractiveness worldwide. The EHEA global appeal elevated its policy influence, requiring institutionalised structures (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) and a comprehensive European representation.

In striving for global prominence, the EHEA leveraged existing connections and collaborations, enabled by shared norms, practices and institutions given that the countries were already culturally embedded (Meyer, Boli, Thomas & Ramirez, 1997; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000). These fostered EHEA membership expansion, alignment, and institutionalisation of its goals in organisations (Meyer & Ramirez, 2000) such as UNESCO, Tampus and Erasmus Mundus, which led to the further adoption of the BP and convergence of systems in terms of policies.

The EHEA's global expansion relied on infrastructural and organisational instruments for information dissemination and global convergence (Meyer, Ramirez, Robinson & Boli-Bennet, 1977). Seminars, web-based content, leaflets, and international visits facilitated global policy circulation, diffusion, and institutionalisation. (Chisholm, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2015; Wiseman, Astiz and Bakar, 2014). Organisational units, including the Bologna Policy Forum, the Advisory Group on International Cooperation and the Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue bolstered the EHEA global influence, making it a reference point for harmonising national HE systems worldwide.

The EHEA's global efforts aligned with its objectives of increasing the international competitiveness of European HE systems (Bologna Declaration, 1999), especially compared to the US HE system, which remained the 'silent other' to the BP reforms until 2008. Following discussions promoted by 'The Bologna Club: What U.S. Higher Education Can Learn from a Decade of European Reconstruction' in 2008, the US began considering Bologna approaches for HE (Adelman, 2009). What has come out from these discussions, is beyond the scope of this article, hence, a potential topic for further research.

In the discourse on diffusing EHEA, Fairclough's concepts of identification, action, and representation portrayed the EHEA as an active, influential, and cooperative player in global HE. Through strategic identification, the EHEA positions itself as a forward-thinking leader,

fostering shared purpose and identity. Action-oriented language legitimised the EHEA's agency to shape international education policy. Representation emphasised the EHEA's role as a promoter of shared norms and values, portraying it as an inclusive and open partner for global engagement.

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