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The Role of the “Periphery” in the Development of the “Center”: External Forces Shaping the European Higher Education Area

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ABSTRACT

Discussions on the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) often highlight its global influence. However, the role of non-EHEA countries—the “periphery”—in shaping its development remains underexplored. This article examines how the “periphery” has contributed to the EHEA’s evolution. Drawing on world-system and decolonial theories and using critical discourse analysis of 26 EHEA documents (1998–2024), we argue that the “periphery” is not merely a passive recipient of EHEA policies but has played a key role in its construction. This argument is explored through three themes: (1) constitutive influence of the periphery on the EHEA’s external dimension; (2) historical and structural role of the periphery in the EHEA’s global status; and (3) the “periphery” as a consultative body shaping EHEA policy dialogue. Recognizing these roles challenges Eurocentric narratives and underscores the “periphery’s” agency in co-constructing global higher education. These insights are crucial for informing international policy discussions and reform efforts within EHEA signatory states and beyond. By shifting the focus from EHEA’s dominance to a more collaborative and nuanced relationship between the core and the periphery, this analysis offers a revised understanding of how global higher education is shaped beyond traditional core–periphery binaries.

Introduction

Over two decades of the development of the Bologna Process (BP) has led to it becoming “an international higher education regime,” given its influence worldwide (Zahavi & Friedman, 2020, p. 22). Indeed, scholarship on other regions such as the Asia Pacific, African, and Latin American regions emphasizes the influence of the European Higher Education AREA (EHEA) far beyond its borders—by inspiring higher education (HE) reforms in those regions (Alemu, 2022; Eta & Kushnir, 2025; Eta & Mngo, 2021; Mekonnen et al., 2022; Pohlenz & Niedermeier, 2019). Such scholarly interest in the “Bolognazation of global higher education” (Chao, 2011, p. 102) has contributed to EHEA’s vision for itself to become the most attractive and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (Prague Communiqué, 2001). It has also positioned the EHEA as the so-called center or core on the world HE map (Kushnir & Yazgan, 2024), inevitably pushing the regions that have been looking up to EHEA’s might as the “periphery,” in terms of the world-system theory (Spring, 2008).

Relying on the world-system and decolonial theory as well as a critical discourse analysis of 26 official EHEA documents on the external dimension of the EHEA, this article examines the

hidden or silent influence of other HE spaces in the world on the EHEA, which has not been covered in the available scholarship. In doing so, the article constructs some of the nuances of the relationship between the core and the periphery, bringing into discussion structural and historical issues such as old colonial connections. Instead of focusing on how the EHEA has influenced other regions, we explore how other regions have contributed to the making of the EHEA. We argue in this article that while the periphery did not intentionally create the EHEA, its structural and historical presence played a determining role in its emergence. This perspective allows us to foreground the agency of the periphery, not through intentional and direct action, but through its constitutive role in shaping the center.

The significance of this article is twofold. First, it makes a theoretical contribution to the literature on the world-system theory (e.g., Spring, 2008) by demonstrating that the relationship between the center and “periphery” could be bidirectional in terms of their mutual shaping of each other, rather than a one-directional influence stemming from the center. Additionally, this article adds a valuable and currently underdeveloped perspective to the literature about the EHEA—that the EHEA is partly a product of other regions in the world and HE processes in them. The second main contribution of this article is to policy and its practice, as the findings may inform further policymaking on the international level of the EHEA development of cooperation initiatives with the regions that have also been contributing to the development of the EHEA. These insights are also crucial for informing the policy discourse at the EHEA’s international policymaking level and the practice of the EHEA’s reforms in its signatories, highlighting a more collaborative and nuanced relationship between the core and the periphery that the current EHEA dominance rhetoric excludes.

This paper proceeds by reviewing literature on the external dimension of the EHEA, highlighting its evolving role and strategic priorities. It then outlines our theoretical considerations informed by world-system and decolonial theories. Following this, the methodological decisions that guided the empirical enquiry are presented, before key findings are spelled out and discussed.

The External Dimension of the EHEA

A considerable body of literature has examined the externalization of the BP, emphasizing its influence on other world regions. From the outset, the BP aimed to project an attractive image of the EHEA globally (Eta & Kushnir, 2025; Mngo, 2019; Vögtle & Martens, 2014; Zmas, 2015). This ambition aligned with the broader internationalization of HE, driven by globalization, student and faculty mobility, joint degree programs, international competition, and the global labor market (Altbach & Knight, 2007). These dynamics encouraged other world regions to look to the EHEA as a model and to adopt similar policies.

More recent scholarship has shifted focus to the extent and ways in which the BP’s external dimension goals have been realized (Damro & Friedman, 2018; Klemenčič, 2019; Mngo, 2019; Vögtle & Martens, 2014; Zgaga, 2019; Zmas, 2015). However, systematic analyses of the EHEA’s external dimension remain relatively limited. The objective of expanding EHEA’s influence beyond its borders was already embedded in the BP at its launch in 1999 (Klemenčič, 2019; Kushnir & Yazgan, 2023; Vögtle & Martens, 2014). The establishment of the External Dimension Working Group marked a key step, culminating in five core policy areas for action adopted in 2007 (Bologna Process, 2007; Zgaga, 2019): (1) raising awareness about the EHEA, (2) promoting the EHEA’s attractiveness and competitiveness, (3) strengthening partnership, (4) intensifying policy dialogue, and (5) enhancing the recognition of qualifications.

Beyond the EHEA, several studies have explored its influence on HE in the Asia-Pacific region (Chao, 2011; Dang, 2015; Pohlenz & Niedermeier, 2019; Zeng et al., 2013), Africa (Alemu, 2019, 2022; Eta, 2015, 2023; Eta & Mngo, 2021; Mekonnen et al., 2022; Sall & Ndjaye, 2007), and Latin America (Figuerola, 2010; Gacel-Ávila, 2011). Chao (2011, p. 102) describes this trend as the “Bolognazation of global higher education.” This process has unfolded in diverse ways

across regions through various policy instruments, shaped by local interpretations and implementation challenges.

In what follows, we present four key themes we identified emerging from the literature on the EHEA's external dimension, namely, (1) aspirations in different world regions to create their own HE areas inspired by the EHEA, (2) adoption and adaptation of BP instruments, (3), context-specific rationales for borrowing BP elements, and (4) challenges encountered in the policy-borrowing process.

Various regions have adopted different approaches in their efforts to create distinct HE areas inspired by the EHEA. In Africa, the focus has been on enhancing student mobility across the continent (Mngo, 2019). Sall and Ndjaye (2007) attribute some countries' motivation to harmonize and internationalize their HE systems to initiatives such as online course provision, joint program development, and franchised universities, often influenced by former colonial powers (France, Belgium, Portugal, and the United Kingdom). Similarly, Alemu (2019) explores how the EHEA's external dimension is reflected in African HE reforms, rooted in the region's colonial educational legacies. In the Asia-Pacific region, Australia played a leading role by initiating the Brisbane Communiqué, which influenced Southeast Asian countries (Dang, 2015; Mngo, 2019; Zeng et al., 2013). Chao (2011, p. 102) describes this as the "Bolognazation of the Asia Pacific region," noting that the Brisbane Communiqué aimed to promote student and academic mobility and the mutual recognition of qualifications, mirroring BP goals. Dang (2015) further examines how and to what extent the BP has influenced ASEAN HE policies, emphasizing the importance of domestic policy actors and local contexts in shaping the degree of European policy adoption. In Latin America, efforts to establish a common HE area have been limited. Nonetheless, scholars such as Gacel-Ávila (2011) observe growing collaboration among Latin American universities, and between institutions in Latin America and Europe, inspired by the EHEA model.

Countries in Africa, the Asia-Pacific region, and Latin America have adopted HE instruments inspired by the BP. In Southeast Asia, efforts have centered on quality assurance, notably through the establishment of the ASEAN Quality Assurance Network (AQAN) for accreditation and audits (Pohlenz & Niedermeier, 2019). The region has also sought to emulate the EHEA by implementing a credit transfer system and qualifications framework. African countries have drawn from EHEA reforms, often guided by African Union decisions, regional organizations, and Bologna member states (Alemu, 2019; Eta & Mngo, 2021). Similar to Southeast Asia, African initiatives focus on harmonizing quality assurance systems and recognizing qualifications (Alemu, 2019, 2022). In contrast, Latin America shows fewer direct adoptions of EHEA instruments (Gacel-Ávila, 2011). However, BP principles have influenced national reforms, such as Chile's creation of a National Academic Credit System and institutional reforms in Mexico (Figuerola, 2010).

The motivations for adopting BP-like reforms vary across regions. In the Asia-Pacific, the focus is largely economic. For instance, the Brisbane Communiqué was designed to respond to global changes in international education and enhance competitiveness (Chao, 2011). Similarly, ASEAN's initiatives were driven by the goal of competing in the global HE market (Pohlenz & Niedermeier, 2019). In Africa, the BP has been viewed as a means to address systemic weaknesses in HE and to respond to the pressures of globalization and internationalization (Sall & Ndjaye, 2007). By contrast, Latin America has shown less enthusiasm for adopting EHEA-style reforms, partly due to greater regional diversity and limited economic, political, and social integration (Gacel-Ávila, 2011). This has made policy convergence more difficult compared to Africa and Southeast Asia (Mngo, 2019).

The adoption of BP reforms in these regions has faced several challenges, many stemming from internal socioeconomic disparities. Zeng et al. (2013), examining the potential for convergence within the China--ASEAN Free Trade Area (CAFTA), highlight differences in economic and cultural contexts, as well as external pressures. While the CAFTA region may be capable of adopting BP-inspired reforms, the unequal development of HE systems risks perpetuating educational imperialism by favoring stronger countries. Similarly, Pohlenz and Niedermeier (2019) identify issues of trust and institutional competition, noting that integration may not benefit

stronger HE institutions when quality and capacity vary widely. Regional caution in the Asia-Pacific also reflects these internal disparities. In Africa, the BP is sometimes seen as both a reform tool and a form of neo-colonial influence (Alemu, 2019). Alemu also draws attention to broader barriers to reform, including political instability, unequal partnerships, foreign influence, epistemic dominance of the Global North, and brain drain.

Alemu (2022) further argues that HE institutions with colonial legacies have adopted reforms that hinder the emergence of authentic African HE systems. In Ethiopia, Mekonnen et al. (2022) observe that despite adopting BP-inspired reforms, university staff perceive low institutional autonomy, contradicting the BP's principle of academic freedom. In Cameroon, BP reforms focusing on graduate employability have raised tensions between social justice and neoliberal objectives and between inclusive education and market-driven access (Eta, 2018, 2023). In Latin America, critiques point to the Eurocentric nature of the BP and its hegemonic soft power (Figueroa, 2010). More broadly, Moscovitz and Zahavi (2019) argue that the BP functions as a tool of European foreign policy.

The literature on Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and Latin America demonstrates the EHEA's growing influence beyond Europe. However, more research is needed to fully understand the implications of this influence and to explore the external dimension of the EHEA not only as an outward projection but also as a space shaped by reciprocal global interactions.

Revisiting the Role of the “Periphery” in World-System Theory through a Decolonial Critique

The World-System Theory (WST) started developing its roots back in the 1960s and 1970s when the global order was becoming a hot topic amongst social scientists (Robertson & Lechner, 1985). Having rested on Wallerstein's initial thinking and emerged predominantly as an approach for the analysis of “economic development in the Third World,” its scope soon broadened to capture the explanation of “the historical rise of the West, as well as the continued poverty of most non-Western societies” (Chirot & Hall, 1982, p. 81). In more recent literature, the WST views the world, rather than individual nation-states, as the most suitable unit of social analysis (Maringe, 2022) and as an analytical approach that focuses on global development and integration while distinguishing the core and peripheral zones that, importantly, are unequal in the process of integration (Spring, 2008).

The center-“periphery” relations between developed and developing countries is based on the idea of the “domination” of the latter by the former. The core regions represent the most powerful nations that benefited from capitalist exploitation of poorer nations in the “periphery” during centuries of colonial domination (Maringe, 2022). The USA, the EU and Japan are key regions at the heart of the core zone which dominates all other nations which constitute the “periphery” and legitimizes its power by “inculcating its values into ‘periphery’ nations” (Spring, 2008, p. 334). Their influence extends to HE, with their institutions providing the blueprint for the rest of the world, especially the peripheral regions (Maringe, 2022). The theory has been widely used, further developed, and applied in various areas, including HE (e.g., King, 2010; Maringe, 2022). For instance, Perry and Tor (2008, p. 513) apply it to the analysis of education policy transfer, highlighting the dependability of the “periphery” on the center.

Such framing of global relations is not only economic or political but also deeply discursive. As Hall (1992) argues in his seminal work, *The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power*, the construction of the “West” as a civilized, rational, and progressive force is sustained through the simultaneous construction of the “Rest” as its inferior other. This discursive formation legitimizes the dominance of the core and marginalizes the agency of the periphery. Incorporating Hall's perspective allows us to see how the EHEA, as a project of the “center,” may reproduce these discursive hierarchies even as it engages with the “periphery” in ostensibly cooperative ways. Similarly, Klerides et al. (2014, p. 5) conceptualize European education actors as “neo-empires

of knowledge” – entities that exercise normative influence through the circulation of educational values, best practices, and policy models. These neo-empires operate not through coercion but through consensus, cooperation, and the persuasive power of knowledge, further entrenching asymmetrical relationships between center and periphery.

The orthodoxy of this theory has been challenged by a few scholars. Freeman (2006, p. 370) provides a critique of the “center-‘periphery’ model” stating that diffusion does not have a center and targeted user. This critique is concordant with Meyer’s (2000) idea about the absence of the central controlling organ in the expansion of the world culture that is produced. A specific example could also be found in Agnew’s (2020, p. 17) critique of the WST as outdated, based on the analysis of the “American impasse in the world economy.”

WST has also been criticized for its coloniality tendency—of knowledge, power, and being (Maringe, 2022; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000). Coloniality of knowledge privileges Western frameworks while marginalizing other epistemologies. Coloniality of power emphasizes the continued dominance of former colonial powers through concentrated political, economic, and cultural control. Coloniality of being refers to the persistent practice of valuing Western forms of existence while devaluing indigenous ways of being. Modernist, postmodernist, and liberal paradigms have positioned Northern ways of being as the universal standard. However, the Global South offers distinct and equally valid ways of existence. As Carnoy (2025, p. 2) argues, a decolonial critique presents a “different way of understanding the world that rejects (‘delinks’ from) the inherently ‘colonising,’ Eurocentric, modernist framing” of ontology and epistemology, allowing a greater representation of marginalized voices in global policymaking. Critiquing the WST from the perspective of coloniality necessitates decolonial thinking, which, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2015) and Maringe (2022) argue, reveals how HE remains hostage to the same knowledges and power structures that created colonization, racism, and imperialism. Decolonial thinking allows for reexamination of core–“periphery” dynamics in global policy development, making visible the often-overlooked contributions and influence of the “periphery.” Although our data comes from EHEA-authored documents, we argue that a decolonial lens is vital to interrogating how the periphery is represented, silenced, or instrumentalized, and to revealing the epistemic hierarchies shaping global HE discourse.

Despite the critique, WST remains a useful lens for analyzing the development of the EHEA, particularly in highlighting the role of the “periphery.” Our decolonial critique is inspired by the literature on the BP’s external dimension just reviewed, which often frames Asia-Pacific, African, and Latin American regions as those where HE has been influenced by the EHEA. This, arguably, positions the EHEA as the “center” and these other regions as the “periphery” in education policy transfer process. However, as the gap in the literature and our analysis of the EHEA documents will showcase, this one-way flow of influence should not be taken for granted. Our analysis challenges this narrative, revealing the “periphery’s” contribution in constructing the center, underscoring the reciprocal and nuanced dynamics of these relationships.

While we use the terms “center” and “periphery” to frame our analysis, we acknowledge their historically evolving and context-dependent constructs. The EHEA documents often use terms such as “partner regions” or “other parts of the world,” which reflect a more diplomatic and inclusive discourse. Our use of “periphery” is therefore analytical rather than literal, and aims to problematize the binary by showing its dynamic nature.

Methodology

This article relies on documents from the official EHEA website as a data source to address the following key question: What role do non-European regions at the global “periphery” play in shaping the EHEA as a powerful “center”?

The document selection followed these inclusion criteria: The documents must originate from the EHEA website, reference the Bologna Process (BP) external dimension, discuss its global context or internationalization, and outline action plans or roadmaps for implementation. In

Table 1. Document types used as data: 1998–2024.

Document and year	Document type
Sorbonne Joint Declaration (1998)	Declaration
Bologna Declaration (1999). <i>The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999</i>	Declarations
Prague Communiqué (2001). <i>Towards the European Higher Education Area</i>	Communiqué
Berlin Communiqué (2003). <i>Realising the European Higher Education Area. In Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education.</i>	Communiqué
Bergen Communiqué (2005). <i>The European Higher Education Area Achieving the Goals, in Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education</i>	Communiqué
London Communiqué (2007). <i>Towards the European Higher Education Area: Responding to Challenges in a Globalised World</i>	Communiqué
Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009). <i>The Bologna Process 2020—The European Higher Education Area in the New Decade</i>	Communiqué
Bucharest Communiqué (2012)	Communiqué
Yerevan Communiqué (2015). <i>EHEA Ministerial Conference. European Higher Education Area</i>	Communiqué
Paris Communiqué (2018). <i>EHEA Ministerial Conference</i>	Communiqué
Rome Ministerial Communiqué (2020)	Communiqué
Bologna Policy Forum (2018). <i>Statement of the Fifth Bologna Policy Forum</i>	Discussion paper
Pavel Zgaga (2007). <i>Looking Out: The Bologna Process in a Global Setting. On the “External Dimension” of the Bologna Process</i>	Report
BFUG (2016a). <i>Terms of Reference of the Advisory Group on EHEA International Cooperation (AG1)</i>	Terms of reference
BFUG (2016b). <i>EHEA International Cooperation Parallel Session: How to Think an EHEA International Partnership Policy and Rethink the Bologna Policy Forum?</i>	Summary
BFUG (2016c). <i>Advisory Group 1: International Co-operation</i>	Report
BFUG (2017). <i>Advisory Group 1. EHEA International Co-operation. Summary of Activities and Approach</i>	Summary
Ella Ritchie (2018). <i>On EHEA on International Co-operation</i>	Report
Global Policy Dialogue (2019). <i>Report of the CG Global Policy Dialogue</i>	Report
Global Policy Dialogue (2020). <i>Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue</i>	Report
Global Policy Dialogue (2024). <i>Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue</i>	Report
Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2005). <i>Proposal for a Seminar on the External Dimension of the Bologna Process</i>	Proposal
Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2007). <i>European Higher Education in a Global Setting</i>	Strategy
Global Policy Dialogue (2021). <i>First Meeting of Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue</i>	Minutes
Global Policy Dialogue (2022a). <i>Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. Second Meeting</i>	Minutes
Global Policy Dialogue (2022b). <i>Coordination Group on Global Policy Dialogue. Third Meeting</i>	Minutes

total, 26 documents (comprising declarations, communiqués, reports, summaries, terms of reference, proposals, strategy, discussion papers, and minutes) were collected, spanning from the establishment of the EHEA in 1998 to 2024 (see Table 1).

We applied critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine the role of “peripheral” regions in shaping the EHEA as a dominant center. According to Wodak and Meyer (2008), the CDA is a tool for studying the relationship between discourse and social phenomena. The following three concepts serves as central pillars of the CDA: power, ideology, and critique. Power is viewed as a characteristic of society, ideology as a “hidden and latent type of everyday beliefs, which often appear disguised as conceptual metaphors and analogies” (Wodak & Meyer, 2008, p. 8), and critique as making visible interconnections among issues rather than purely expressing negative attitudes. Ideologies are “representation of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation” (Fairclough, 2003). Discourse in the CDA stands for “language use in speech and writing—as a form of ‘social practice,’” which presupposes “a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it,” thus making discourse “socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned” (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Importantly, discourse in the field of education is never neutral; it is political and embedded in context (Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Rogers et al., 2005). The EHEA documents we analyzed are not merely records of policy but “sites of struggle” where competing voices negotiate for dominance (Wodak & Meyer, 2008, p. 10). A decolonial lens makes these discourses visible, highlighting how both dominant and silent narratives shape the EHEA landscape.

The analysis started with a critical reading of the 26 documents to identify terminologies, wordings, and argumentation (Fairclough, 2010). During the second phase of reading, content related to the EHEA's global outreach mechanisms was extracted into a Word document for further analysis. This content was then examined through the lenses of power, ideology, and critique to analyze the “periphery’s” role in shaping the EHEA. Power was analyzed in how the EHEA documents frame relationships with non-EHEA countries—whether as collaborators, recipients, or strategic assets. Ideology was explored through metaphors and narratives that present the EHEA as a global model. Critique was applied by interrogating the assumptions and silences in how peripheral actors were represented. ChatGPT was used for language improvement.

The Constructive Role of the “Periphery” in the Development of the EHEA

This section unpacks our argument that the “periphery” has not merely been a recipient of EHEA policies but has contributed to shape its development. Though not an intentional architecture, the periphery’s structural and historical presence played a significant role in the EHEA emergence. Its agency lies not through direct action, but through its constitutive role in shaping the center. We discuss this through three key themes: (1) constitutive influence of the periphery on the EHEA’s external dimension; (2) historical and structural role of the periphery in the EHEA’s global status; and (3) the “periphery” as a consultative body shaping EHEA policy dialogue. While the peripheral voices are often mediated through EHEA centrally authored documents, our analysis highlights their structural influence, even when not directly voiced.

Constitutive Influence of the Periphery on the EHEA’s External Dimension

The external dimension of the BP is often described in official documents as a response to the interests and requests from countries on the “periphery” of Europe and in other world regions. When the BP was initiated with the goal of creating the EHEA, the initial focus, as evident from the documents, was primarily on core European countries, particularly those within the European Union (EU). One of the key objectives was to enhance the internal attractiveness of European higher education systems as a means to increase their external appeal (Eta & Kushnir, 2025). This strategy aimed to attract students and promote mobility both within Europe and from other regions to Europe, as reflected in the following quote:

The very beginning of the Bologna Process was characterised by the belief that changes in the structure of European higher education systems could be the main vehicle for raising attractiveness worldwide. Of course, this sentence could and should be read also in a reverse way: efforts to increase worldwide attractiveness are an important lever to improve European higher education systems “internally,” as well as to establish European higher education as such. (Zgaga, 2007, p. 10)

Enhancing the attractiveness of European HE aimed to boost its “international competitiveness” and ensure it “acquires a worldwide degree of attraction equal to our extraordinary culture” (Bologna Declaration, 1999). This goal was to be achieved through various action lines, including adopting the three-cycle degree structure, implementing a credit system, improving quality assurance, fostering mobility, promoting lifelong learning, engaging HE institutions and students, and advancing the European dimension of HE. By 2003, discussions about increasing the EHEA’s attractiveness remained primarily inward-focused. The emphasis was on scholarship programs to attract students to Europe and foster cooperation with other world regions, as outlined in the Berlin Communiqué (2003, p. 6):

Ministers agree that the attractiveness and openness of the European higher education should be reinforced. They confirm their readiness to further develop scholarship programmes for students from third countries. [...]. They encourage the co-operation with regions in other parts of the world by opening Bologna seminars and conferences to representatives of these regions.

As the EHEA became more internally consolidated, countries outside the EU began expressing interest in joining. This trend first emerged among European countries on the “periphery,” particularly non-EU member states, as discussions around defining Europe intensified. In an effort to create a more inclusive Europe, this growing interest led the European Ministers of Education in 2003 to adopt a clause proposed during the 2001 Prague Conference, opening up membership to the EHEA:

Countries party to the European Cultural Convention shall be eligible for membership of the European Higher Education Area provided that they at the same time declare their willingness to pursue and implement the objectives of the Bologna Process in their own systems of higher education. Their applications should contain information on how they will implement the principles and objectives of the declaration.

The European Cultural Convention, signed in 1954 in Paris, sought to cultivate a shared European cultural heritage by encouraging cultural activities, fostering cooperation, and promoting the mobility and exchange of people and cultural goods within Europe (Council of Europe, 1954). The adoption of this clause led to an expansion of EHEA membership between 2003 and 2010, increasing from 33 to 48 members. Newly admitted countries included Albania, Andorra, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Holy See, Russia, Serbia, Montenegro, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, the Republic of Montenegro, Kazakhstan, and Belarus.

Beyond Europe, countries on the “periphery” in other parts of the world also expressed growing interest in the EHEA reform model. This interest contributed to discussions about the EHEA’s external dimension and strategic development. The Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research (2007, p. 1) noted:

the European reform model’ has created considerable interest. It has a strong—and growing—appeal in other parts of the world [...]. It is important for Europe to use this momentum and to respond to the global interest in its reforms. (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, p. 1)

This interest and request promoted the “development of a strategy for the External Dimension of the Bologna Process” (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, p. 1), focusing on how to involve countries from other parts of the world in the development of the EHEA and exploring whether “Bologna-like reforms should be adopted” in domestic higher education reform processes, or serve as a model for regional convergence (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, p. 1).

The establishment of the Bologna Policy Fora was likewise inspired “by the interest of other countries for the Bologna experience, which was taken by many as a model” (Global Policy Dialogue, 2024).

Historical and Structural Role of the Periphery in the EHEA’s Global Status

As highlighted in the Bologna Declaration (1999), “the vitality and efficiency of any civilization can be measured by the appeal that its culture has for other countries.” This statement underscores the idea that the attractiveness of the EHEA to countries beyond its boundaries serves as a key indicator of the Bologna Process’s global significance and influence. In essence, the appeal of the EHEA is not just a reflection of its internal success but also a measure of how it resonates with and inspires interest from other regions. This attractiveness demonstrates the EHEA’s ability to position itself as a global benchmark for HE reform and collaboration. The engagement of countries outside the EU and EHEA, whether through becoming signatories to the EHEA, adopting similar reforms, or seeking partnerships, can be viewed as a validation of the Bologna Process’s goals and its broader cultural and educational impact on the world stage.

The EHEA’s global reach builds on long-standing relationships, collaborations, and exchanges that involve the “periphery.” These relationships are not ahistorical; they include structural and historical connections such as colonial and postcolonial ties, trade routes, and established academic linkages that predate the BP but shape how engagement unfolds. For example, the 2007

strategy for the external dimension of the BP, which does not exclude any region or country, speaks to a strategy of openness in which engagement with diverse HE systems strengthens the EHEA's global presence:

The strategy does not exclude any region or country of the world, meanwhile individual European countries have strong links with specific regions or countries outside Europe and they may want to develop those links further. The diversity of the international cooperation activities of individual nations and institutions of higher education across the world should be perceived as a strength and an asset for the EHEA. (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2007, p. 3)

National ties between European countries and regions beyond Europe, many of which are shaped by historical, political, economic, and colonial relations, create opportunities for cooperation, making the EHEA more relevant on a global scale. The more countries and regions engage, the more the EHEA's influence expands as a collaborative and evolving force in global HE.

Hence, the “periphery” has not just been a passive recipient of the EHEA's influence—it contributes to shaping and reinforcing the EHEA global standing. For example, the Bologna Policy Forum (BPF) serves as a bridge, linking the EHEA with regions beyond its immediate borders, expanding its reach, and solidifying its role as a reference point for HE reforms worldwide, which helps to increase its international prestige and makes the EHEA a point of reference:

The BPF, as it has been conceived until now, is one element of the strategy for “EHEA in a global setting” implemented to promote the international prestige of the Bologna Process and to increase the worldwide influence of the European Higher Education Area in a context where competition was increasing very fast. Through sharing best policy practices and understanding, the BPF helped to make EHEA a point of reference for harmonising national systems of Higher Education through regional and cooperative approaches. (BFUG, 2017, p. 13)

As HE systems around the world evolve, the EHEA ensures its relevance by fostering dialogue, sharing policy practices, and encouraging regional cooperation. The more national systems outside Europe align with or take inspiration from the EHEA's frameworks, the stronger its global footprint becomes, especially in a competitive HE environment where “the EHEA is no longer the only paradigm to emulate” (BFUG, 2017, p. 2). These dialogues that includes non-European countries highlight the idea that the EHEA is not just a European project but a globally recognized force in HE, seen “worldwide as a repository of good practice both in its policies and practice” (BFUG, 2017, p. 2) and “a beacon for change in non-EHEA countries” (BFUG, 2017, p. 3).

The documents underscore the strategic intent behind initiatives like the BPF in shaping the global status of the EHEA brand but also acknowledges that influence is not just about projecting European educational models outward. It entails

finding a good balance between the BPF's purpose to strengthen the influence of EHEA in the world and the necessity to listen and learn from the world to take joint decisions (Ritchie, 2018, p. 19).

The “necessity to listen and learn” suggests that influence is not a one-sided process but a mutual exchange in which peripheral regions contribute knowledge and perspectives to joint decision-making, shaping the evolution of the EHEA. Moreover, the EHEA's representation at various events, including conferences and focused discussions in non-EHEA regions and countries, was said to “help to increase visibility and the global presence of the EHEA” (Global Policy Dialogue, 2021).

The Periphery as a Consultative Body Contributing to EHEA Policy Dialogue

The “periphery” has acted as a think tank, contributing in refining the very structures of the EHEA. Through their involvement in policy dialogues, collaborative initiatives, and regional engagements, these countries and regions have continuously provided critical insights, feedback, and experiences and contribute to strategic thinking and decision-making processes of the internationalization of the EHEA. With different policy instruments:

Since 2005, the internationalisation of the EHEA has been supported by different reports, 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” (BPF) during the Ministerial Conferences in Leuven in 2009, followed by Vienna (2010), Bucharest (2012) and Yerevan (2015). (BFUG, 2016b, p. 1)

In these different working fora, non-EHEA countries were invited to participate, among them representatives from “Latin America, North America, Africa, Asia, Middle East and the Mediterranean countries,” which the EHEA through the Advisory Group 1 (AG1) has defined as its geographic scope (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015). Given the heightened interest of the EHEA having representation from these regions, discussions also centered around, for example, whether incorporating the GPA into the Ministerial Conference was “well suited to attract appropriate interest from other regions” (Global Policy Dialogue, 2022b).

One of the reasons for the invitation for representation of these non-EHEA countries was to use the events as a space where different countries and regions could engage in dialogue with the EHEA. The following quotes highlight this in relation to their participation in Advisory Group 1 (AG1) on International Cooperation, which was established by the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). AG1 was tasked with developing proposals to make the EHEA more “outward-looking,” defining a roadmap for policy dialogue with non-EHEA countries, and creating a cooperation strategy based on shared values and key issues (BFUG, 2017, p. 1):

The AG1 meeting in Madrid attracted representatives from Latin America, North Africa and the Mediterranean area and gave us an opportunity to test various approaches of the EHEA and the feasibility of new proposals with the Regional Groupings. During the detailed discussions it became clear that conforming to the EHEA standards and guidelines and participating in the EHEA process was not only a mechanism for reform for other Regions but also a driver for developing coherence and collaboration within their own networks. (BFUG, 2017, p. 3)

Such meetings and events brought together representatives and thought leaders from Latin America, North Africa, and the Mediterranean, which provides an opportunity for EHEA approaches to be tested, debated, and shaped, contributing to its development. The mention of “detailed discussions” implies an exchange of knowledge, in which the “periphery” acted as a critical voice, a testing ground, and a source of inspiration, pushing the EHEA beyond its Eurocentric confines and into a more globally inclusive and appealing framework.

The opinions and perceptions of these peripheral regions and countries have been sought in the development of the EHEA. For example, one of the tasks of the coordination group was to conduct “an analysis of non-EHEA countries’ perceptions of the EHEA” (Global Policy Dialogue, 2022a). This highlights the contribution of non-EHEA countries in shaping the EHEA’s international positioning and cooperation strategies in its global development efforts through knowledge production. Moreover, learning from how non-EHEA countries perceive the EHEA contributes to EHEA strategic outreach and evidence-based recommendations for its global expansion. In addition, such consultations were directly sought from ministers from non-EHEA countries:

In its previous meeting, CG1 decided to address the Ministers from non-EHEA countries, who were invited and attended the Paris Bologna Policy Forum (BPF) in 2018, as well as those who did not attend. [...] and sent invitation letters to 38 EHEA non-member countries. [...] The Co-Chairs asked the Ministers to give suggestions on the key themes or topics, which would be of greatest interest for the coming GPF and to indicate any upcoming events related to Higher Education in their country/region that might provide an opportunity to promote GDP. (Global Policy Dialogue, 2019b, 2)

The invitation of 38 nonmember countries to contribute to discussions at the BPF reflects a strategic effort to include diverse global perspectives in shaping higher education policies. By requesting suggestions on key themes for the GPF and identifying relevant HE events worldwide, these non-EHEA countries inform EHEA policymaking and promote its global presence through diverse channels, including diplomatic and academic channels. The role is also echoed in the coordination group on Global Policy Dialogue (2024) final report, in which shareholders and organizations from countries in the “periphery,” especially African countries, were funded to participate and provide their feedback on the GPF statement:

17 African stakeholders were funded to attend the meeting in person through the HAQAA initiative, which included regional continental organisations such as the Association of African Universities (AAU), the Association for the Development of Education in Africa CG ON GPD Final Report 9/29 (ADEA), the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Secretariat and the UbuntuNet Alliance for Research and Education Networking.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated in this article that what has been framed by the policy discourse and scholarship as a global “periphery” of the EHEA has, in fact, played a significant role in its construction and development. By examining the contributions of non-EHEA countries through the lenses of decolonial critique of WST, and employing critical discourse analysis of key EHEA documents, we have highlighted the “periphery’s” influence in initiating external engagement, enhancing global prestige, and shaping policy dialogue. Although the periphery did not deliberately shape the EHEA’s formation, its structural and historical positioning significantly influenced that development. This perspective highlights the periphery’s agency—not through overt action, but by shaping the center’s identity, cohesion, and vision. As discussed here, the periphery is essential to the core’s effort to articulate a new normative hegemony in competition with other global actors.

Acknowledging these contributions challenges colonial Eurocentric narratives and underscores the agency of the “periphery” in co-constructing the global HE landscape. These insights are crucial for informing policy discourse at the EHEA’s international policymaking level and guiding the practice of EHEA reforms among its signatories, offering a revised perspective on power dynamics that the current dominance rhetoric excludes.

This article can serve as a stepping stone to inspire further research that could include comparative studies of and between different regions within the “periphery” to understand their varying and direct influences on the EHEA. Longitudinal analyses to track the evolving role of the “periphery” over time would also be important. Additionally, in-depth case studies, policy impact assessments, stakeholder perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches are crucial to further consolidate our comprehensive understanding of the “periphery’s” contributions in the development of the EHEA and beyond.

Authors’ Contributions

Both authors contributed to the study’s conception and design. Data collection and analysis were conducted by Elizabeth Eta, while Iryna Kushnir drafted the literature review and theoretical sections. Base on Iryna’s first draft of the WST, Elizabeth conducted a further analysis from a decolonial perspective. Both authors provided feedback on previous versions of the article and approved the final version.

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