

Probing the progress of the external dimension of the Bologna process

Bologna
process

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to assess the “external dimension” goals of the Pan European Bologna reform, almost 19 years after its launch. The influences of the reform on higher education in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Asia-Pacific are investigated. The paper analyses the appeal of the 1999 Bologna Process (BP), which, arguably, symbolizes an effort to strengthen the hegemony of Western European education and influence, has for the first time gone beyond ex-colonial lines, including areas where Europe’s socio-political influence is not impactful.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper opted for an analytical review of the literature on the European higher education internationalization goals as stated in external dimension objectives of the Bologna Process reform. The literature search was complicated by the limited number of peer review articles focusing on the spread of the Bologna model beyond Europe. As a result, the inclusion criteria were flexible, and consideration was given to educational website reports/articles, dissertations, books, pamphlets, and internal EU/European Commission reports.

Findings – The findings of this review indicate that, in spite of significant challenges, the internationalization objectives of Bologna Process are gradually being met in Africa, Latin America and Asia. Most notable is that some countries that historically did not have a European colonial presence are embracing aspects of the Bologna reform. Almost 19 years after, the BP reform now has a significant external influence not only in the former Portuguese, Spanish, British and French colonies but also beyond. In spite of the overwhelming embrace of the BP model in Europe and outside of Europe, its implementation, everywhere, has faced some administrative, political, and economic challenges.

Research limitations/implications – The study examined the spread of the Bologna Process models beyond Europe and not its acceptability by stakeholders such as faculty and students outside Europe. Future research could examine the satisfaction rates among higher education stakeholders in regions and countries embracing the BP models.

Practical implications – The findings of this review indicate that the steady spread of the BP means that more countries and tertiary education institutions can explore opportunities aimed at developing more educational and socioeconomic partnership, including the exchange of knowledge, technology and resources.

Originality/value – While emphasizing the benefits and opportunities for cooperation, the paper identifies that the increasing internationalization trends influenced by the BP are leading to regional higher education cooperation in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Other higher education models around the world can learn from the marketing strategies of the BP aided by EU.

Keywords Cooperation, Harmonization, Reform, Internationalization, Convergence, Bologna

Paper type Literature review



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Introduction

Globalization of knowledge brought about a fundamental reconsideration of Europe's traditional systems of higher education through the signing of the 1999 European Bologna Process higher education reform. The attractiveness of this reform, 20 years after its launching, is seen in the significant growth in its membership – from 29 countries in 1999 to about 48 countries today, including Russia (EHEA, 2018). Trade in higher education services has become so strong that even countries not involved in reform need to be aware of what is happening because of the inevitability of collaboration among educational systems and institutions in the global education marketplace. According to [Altbach \(2001\)](#), higher education is increasingly seen as a commercial product to be bought and sold like any other commodity. Countries involved in such trade prefer commodities that are easily comparable; hence, the current global drive toward the Bologna model of higher education reform and harmonization in Europe, Africa, Central Asia and Asia-Pacific and Latin America.

The stated number one objective of the external dimension of the Bologna Process (BP) reform was to present and explain the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to other world regions. It is almost 20 years after the launch of the BP, and one year to 2020, the year set by the 2009 Leuven and Louvain conference to achieve a full-fledged EHEA, which makes a study of the effectiveness of the external dimension of the BP timely. This analytical review of literature seeks to examine the extent to which the 'external dimension' goals of the Pan European Bologna reform have been realized, 20 years after its launch. Our focus is on higher education in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia-Pacific.

Towards the Bologna process

The creation of the Bologna Process was the result of logical developments of timid, but incremental moves towards the convergence of European higher education. The reluctance by national governments in Europe to accept interventions in their national education systems had led the European Commission to adopt incremental moves to facilitate the readability and transferability of degrees, and the mobility of students and faculty within the EU ([Reinalda and Kulesza, 2006](#)).

Education was excluded from the 1957 Treaty of Rome which created the European Economic Community (EEC) because it was not considered a priority, even though faint voices encouraged plans for more collaboration in education. The British Government's refusal to participate in any form of Europeanization of trade and education services because of fears of compromising its sovereignty, constituted a major problem to the EEC integration efforts ([Mazey and Richardson, 1992](#)).

In the second half of the 1980s the European Commission funded various projects in the field of vocational training, such as COMETT (Community Action Program in Education and Training for Technology) and FORCE (a program for the development of continuing vocational training) ([Reinalda and Kulesza, 2006](#); [Thompson and Ambler, 1990](#)). Another less-controversial program, The Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students, commonly known as ERASMUS, was started in 1987 to aid the drive towards European higher education harmonization. The creation of the Socrates Program in 1995 was an indication that the drive toward convergence in European higher education had become unstoppable. This program was designed to encourage innovation and improve education quality through closer cooperation between educational institutions in the EU and the European Economic Area ([Reinalda and Kulesza, 2006](#)).

The 1992 Maastricht Treaty was the first European treaty to make a comprehensive reference to the contribution of the EU to education ([European Parliament, 2001](#)). Article 126 of the 1992 Maastricht Treaty became an important clause in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam which preceded the Bologna Declaration. This article gives member states the responsibility for the content and organization of their education system in accordance with their cultural and linguistic diversity. In spite of allowing national systems to consider their specific needs, the Bologna Process commits the signatories to work towards the “Europeanization” of higher education by paradoxically adopting the Anglo-American model, which features a two-tiered degree structure ([Sedgwick, 2001](#)). The resemblance between the Bologna degree structure (Bachelor – three years, Masters – two years and Doctorate – three years) and the British higher education system probably explains why there is less British resistance than was the case during earlier attempts to harmonize European higher education.

The initiative of the French minister of education, Claude Allegre, to invite the education ministers of Britain, Germany and Italy in 1998 was a significant step toward the Bologna Accord ([Reinalda and Kulesza, 2006](#); [Sorbonne Joint Declaration, 1998](#)). Their meeting led to the Sorbonne Declaration, which pointed out that European students seldom have the opportunity to study outside their countries. The statement expressed the need for reform and harmonization that will facilitate student and faculty mobility within Europe and beyond, the diversification of programs, and the improvement of working conditions in European higher educational institutions. Most important is the fact that this declaration recognized the two main cycles of education (graduate/undergraduate) and the use of the credits and semesters system, as the way forward for all of Europe. The call by the four ministers for the creation of a European Higher Education Area materialized the following year in the Italian city of Bologna, with the declaration creating the Bologna Process.

Objectives of the external dimension

The external dimension of the BP makes it the most aggressive reform ever. According to Armstrong (2009), the BP is a very bold experiment that has the potential to change higher education in ways probably not envisaged by its creators. In spite of efforts made by European governments, the EU, and tertiary education institutions to push the “external dimension” of the BP, the model will probably never be accepted everywhere. However, the implications of the reform for non-members of the process remain significant ([Terry, 2007](#)) because of the interconnectedness of today’s international higher education community – characterized by competition for international students, student and faculty mobility, joint-degree programs and a globalized labor market ([Altbach, 2004](#); [Altbach and Knight, 2007](#); [Gorga, 2008](#)).

The goals of the Bologna Process were not limited to ensuring a converging European higher education system. The reform also had the objective of increasing the competitiveness of the European models by ensuring their spread beyond Europe. This goal was expressed clearly by the [Bologna Declaration \(1999\)](#). The May 1998 Sorbonne Declaration that preceded the Bologna Accords pointed to “the international recognition and attractive potential of our systems”, while the Bologna Declaration looked “at the objective of increasing the international competitiveness of the European systems of higher education” and claimed to ensure “a world-wide degree of attraction” ([Zgaga, 2006](#), p. 5). This analytical review of literature seeks to establish the degree of success of these “external dimension” goals of the Pan European Bologna reform, twenty years after its launch. The

influences of the reform on higher education in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Russia and Central Asia, and Asia-Pacific, are reviewed in this study.

Africa

According to [Mohamedbhai \(2007\)](#), African countries showed the need to harmonize their higher education systems to facilitate student and staff mobility decades before European countries did. The difference is that they did not promote harmonization wholly, neither at the regional nor the continental level, until the Europeans adopted the Bologna harmonization reform. He argued that African countries had expressed the need to harmonize for decades, pointing to the fact that Africa's first major efforts at harmonization began with the adoption of the December 5, 1981, Arusha Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications in Higher Education in Africa ([Obasi and Olutayo, 2009](#)). The Arusha Convention objectives, which include the mutual recognition of qualifications to promote regional cooperation through the academic mobility of lecturers and students, were never implemented, unfortunately. Some regions of Africa, especially Francophone North, West, and Central Africa, have been motivated to harmonize following the adoption by European countries of the 1999 Bologna Process reform ([Clark, 2007b](#)).

The World Education Services (WES) report by [Clark \(2007b\)](#) explains that the Bologna Process is greatly affecting higher education in Africa. [MacGregor \(2008\)](#), citing the 2007 Clark report, underscores the fact that the impact of the Bologna Process in Africa has been largely based on ex-colonial lines. Some African countries are directly affected, while others are indirectly affected. These countries are changing their systems of education in line with the French versions of Bologna reform, in particular, and the European reform, in general.

The [African Union \(AU\) \(2007\)](#), an EU-style cooperation body, intervened to encourage higher education harmonization in Africa, suggesting that Bologna be studied as a model for the continent. The May 2007 African Union Meeting of the Bureau of the Conference of Ministers of Education ended with the release of a policy document titled "Harmonization of Higher Education Programs in Africa: A Strategy for the African Union." The document states the Union's strategy for harmonization, which is consistent with its vision of integration, peace, prosperity, and peerge in the global community. It is also compatible with its regard for education as a key instrument in achieving its vision of developing quality human resources and contributing towards increased mobility of Africans around the continent. The ministers acknowledged that within Africa there are many different systems of education, based on different legacies across the continent. The diverse cultural and colonial legacies have led to a lack of mutual recognition of different forms of certification, little cooperation and very low student mobility within Africa.

The influence of the Bologna Process in Africa varies from region to region. The greatest influence has been on French-speaking African countries that are emulating France to reform their higher education systems after the Bologna system. [Neave \(2003\)](#) affirms that English-speaking countries of Africa are not doing as much to reform because the existing British-style systems are close to the Bologna model, which is believed to have a largely Anglo-Saxon inspiration. After close to two decades of implementation of Bologna style reforms in many African countries, research denotes similarities and differences between the two processes, appreciates the strengths and shortcomings of the African process, calls for more exploration into the potential strengths and risks in harmonization initiatives strongly rooted in African countries ([Woldegiyorgis, 2018](#)).

North Africa: In 2003, the Maghreb countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) became the first Francophone African countries to follow the lead of former “colonial master,” France, by adopting the French version of the Bologna model: a three-year licence (degree), two-year master’s and three-year doctoral degree structure (LMD). The initial implementation in these countries was not full scale, involving only some pilot schools. But it was not long before full-scale implementation and cooperation with European countries actually began. The WES Report of April 2006 underscored the high degree of cross-Mediterranean consultation and discussion leading to the creation of the euro-Mediterranean Higher Education and Research Area (EHERA) as an extended branch of the Bologna Process. The EHERA, which includes Egypt, has objectives that are similar to those of the Bologna Process: compatibility between systems and qualifications, credit transfer, student mobility and quality assurance.

CEMAC Countries: The influence of the Bologna Process in Central Africa began to bear fruits in 2005, when the six member Countries of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) - Cameroon, Central Africa Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Republic of Congo – decided to follow the example of the Maghreb countries by realigning their higher education systems along similar lines to the new Bologna-inspired French qualifications framework (Clark, 2007b; Libreville Declaration, 2005). The previous higher education traditions of most of these countries were modeled after those of the French. This was due to the fact that they are former French colonies (Nyamnjoh and Akum, 2008). The only exceptions are Equatorial Guinea, which is a former Spanish colony, and Cameroon, which had both French-style and English-style higher education systems, prior to the reform and harmonization.

The adoption process of the BMD (LMD) in the CEMAC happened in three phases. The conference of ministers of the CEMAC held in Gabon in February 2005, laid the groundwork for the adoption of the French Bologna-style model called the LMD. On February 7, 2005, the Conference of Presidents of Universities and Directors of Research Institutions (*Conférence des Recteurs des Universités et des Responsables des Organismes de Recherche d’Afrique Centrale* (CRUROR/AC) was created (Libreville Declaration, 2005). This was followed, on February 11, 2005, by the declaration of heads of states of CEMAC creating CEMAC Higher Education, Professional Training and Research Area (*Enseignement Supérieur, de la Recherche et de la Formation Professionnelle*). On March 11, 2006, the six member states of CEMAC launched the creation of structures to enable the adoption and implementation of the BMD reform in all universities in the sub-region (CEMAC, 2006).

Francophone West Africa and the DRC: The harmonization of higher education in Francophone West Africa is aided by the combined efforts of UNESCO and the AU, which have helped the Council of Ministers of Francophone West African Economic and Monetary Union to introduce the Bologna-style Licence/Master/Doctorate (LMD) reform (Obasi and Olutayo, 2009; UNESCO Bamako Cluster Office, 2008). The French-based Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie has been sponsoring university reform efforts in the region since 2002 by hosting regional discussions on degree reforms, joint degrees, quality assurance, research capacity, institutional management, and academic mobility (Clark, 2007b). Reform activities are currently taking place in the following French-speaking countries of West Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, and Togo.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has also shown interest in aligning with European higher education reform. This is demonstrated by the country’s hosting of the July 2007 international conference on The African Universities’ Adaptation to the Bologna Process, sponsored by the University Commission for the Development (CUD) of the *Conseil*

Interuniversitaire (CIUF) of the French-speaking Community of Belgium (Obasi, 2007). European countries, through such conferences, have clearly demonstrated their desire to spread the Bologna-style higher education reform to other parts of the world (Douglass and Edelstein, 2009). The Democratic Republic of Congo is actively reforming its higher education system to align with the Bologna model of its former colonial ruler, Belgium (Obasi, 2007).

Portuguese-Speaking Countries: The WES Report (2004) on the impact of the Bologna Process on Africa states that Lusophone African countries are receiving pressure to reform from the Association of Portuguese-Speaking Universities. The report reveals that the association has long been working with countries such as Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique to establish a Lusophone Higher Education Area to facilitate their adoption of Bologna-style reforms. With the expansion of reform to Portuguese-speaking countries endorsed by the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Communities, Lusophone countries are gradually embracing the reform.

English-speaking countries: Identification with the British model (structures and credit system) made it easy for Anglophone countries of Africa recognize the Bologna system, because it was largely inspired by the British system (Neave, 2003). Such Anglophone countries as Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe have not seen Bologna-influenced activity because their existing structure of degrees is already in line with the Bologna architecture. Most of these universities have either the modular or credit systems. In spite of this, some Anglophone countries are adopting innovations inspired by the European reform in areas such as quality assurance. MacGregor (2008), citing Dr Nasima Badsha, advisor to the South African Education Minister and head of the Cape Higher Education Consortium, states that the Bologna Process experience is “pushing the region into looking at its own quality assurance frameworks and the portability of qualifications” (p. 1).

Asia-Pacific

Croisier and Parveva (2013) note that Australia has been in the forefront of establishing the Asia-Pacific process, which is similar to the Bologna Process, and has become known as the Brisbane Process. The decision to align with the Bologna model was made official by the Brisbane Communiqué Initiative, a declaration signed by Asia-Pacific ministers of education, in Brisbane, Australia, on April 4, 2006. It included a pledge to begin harmonizing or converging their higher education systems by collaborating on a number of broad initiatives to encourage and facilitate regional student and academic mobility and exchange, and to address barriers to these activities (Brisbane Communiqué, 2016). They agreed to cooperate in four key areas: quality assurance; recognition of educational and professional qualifications; common competency-based standards for teachers; and the development of common recognition of technical skills across the region to better meet the overall skills needs of the economic base of the region.

The Brisbane embrace of the Bologna model was followed closely by South-East Asian countries’ ministers of education, whose declared intention was to create a higher education space among its ten members. In 2007, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization, meeting in Thailand, initiated discussions and set up directives and objectives toward harmonization and creating a Southeast Asian higher education space, with goals similar to those outlined by the Asian-Pacific countries in Brisbane – quality assurance, credit transfer system, and Association of Southeast Asian Nations research clusters (SEAMEO RIHED, 2011). These goals have been implemented since 2008, with a pilot project under the Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED)

Framework for Regional Integration in Higher Education in Southeast Asia. The center launched the region's Students Mobility Project in 2010 and has continued to implement programs and adopt degree structures similar to the Bologna model (SEAMEO RIHED, 2016).

New models of Indian-European higher education collaborations have emerged since the Bologna Process reform. These collaborations cover areas such as research, study abroad and academic exchange, twin programs, dual and joint-degrees (Choudaha and Orosz, 2011). The European Union has played a key role in actively promoting cooperation with Indian institutions. A good example of such cooperation is the June 2011 science and technology awareness-raising team of representatives of European research institutes that visited 27 Indian research centers, and explored possibilities of scientific research collaboration (European Union, 2011). This kind of collaboration has invigorated Indian students to look to Europe as their first study abroad destination of choice, as well as promoted academic exchange between Indian and European universities. The number of Indian students enrolled in European higher education institutions has continued to grow in recent years, in spite of the fact that the USA still attracts most of them (Choudaha and Orosz, 2011; Mngo, 2011).

Russia and Central Asia

Higher education Russia and the rest of Central Asian countries have undergone significant reform mostly influenced by the European Bologna Process reforms. Russia, joined the Bologna Process barely four years after the launching of the reform in the European Union. Even though there has never been consensus among the members of Russia's academia as to whether the move was justified, the reform certainly has remained in place even as members of the former Soviet Republics such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, GA, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Russia and Ukraine have now joined Bologna's EHEA (Clark, 2015).

Clark (2015) points the fact that even though Kazakhstan is one of five countries that make up the Central Asian region that has formally joined Bologna Accords, the other countries of the region have also been impacted by the reform in varying degrees. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for instance have made significant reforms to their higher education systems over the past decade that align them closely with the Bologna model while the other two countries of the region – Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are beginning to align their Soviet-style systems with the proposed Central Asian Higher Education Area (TuCAHEA) modeled on Bologna's European Higher Education Area.

Latin America and the Caribbean

Brunner (2009) describes the impact of the Bologna Process in Latin America as a stimulant to closer university collaboration between Latin America and European institutions. These collaborations, he adds, are with "Spanish and Portuguese universities, in an effort to create an Ibero-American area of knowledge, with student and faculty exchanges" (p. 417). While other regions have created common higher education spaces to harmonize regionally, on the same lines as the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), this has not been the case with Latin America. Creating a common higher education area in Latin America has been impossible because there are no common regional political, economic, or monetary organizations as there are in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, cooperation between Latin American universities and their European counterparts has intensified with the advent of the BP reform. However, and fortunately, collaborative projects between European and Latin American institutions have already proven that a basis of comparison can be established (Gacel-Ávila, March 2014). Projects such as the Tuning Latin America Project

achieved an identification of generic and specific skills in twelve disciplines through collaboration among Latin American institutions. [Gacel-Ávila \(2014\)](#) surmises that these results show that the educational model promoted by Bologna should be perceived as an opportunity to reform and internationalize the educational model prevailing in Latin America.

University associations and other of forms regional collaboration and efforts at internationalization have occurred in Latin American, with the creation of organizations such as Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE) and Alfa Puentes. These organizations are predominantly university associations that promote bilateral and multilateral cooperation through workshops on mobility, employability, quality and regional integration (Clark, 2014). Latin America's higher education needs and preferences continue to be somewhat influenced by a colonial past that is inextricably linked to Europe, both culturally and linguistically. The TRESAL survey found out that Europe, followed by their own sub-region, remained the destination of choice for most faculty and students with regard to academic mobility (Clark, 2014). The application of BP reform models nationally and regionally in Latin America is boosted by the European Commission's partial funding of organizations such as Alfa Puentes to promote regional integration in Latin America through targeted quality assurance reform, improving credential recognition and transparency, building a qualifications framework and increasing academic mobility.

While Latin America had not been able to develop a full-fledged common higher education area of its own, the region initiated a reform in 2008, alongside countries of the Caribbean leading to the creation of the Latin American and the Caribbean Higher Education Area (ENLACES-IESALC). The organization embraced the creation of a number projects, including an information platform to support the Academic Mobility Program for Professors, Researchers and Students of Latin America. It also enabled the development of a Map of Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean, which brings together data on national higher education systems as a means of promoting academic mobility and the alignment of national and institutional policies. The 2013 UNESCO report indicated that IESALC was meeting the goals set in 2008 by:

Reorganization of its Governing Board and strategic review process, and is positioning itself as a leader in the regional higher education sector through initiatives to improve communication and synergies with governments, universities, other higher education institutions and networks within Latin America and the Caribbean region ([UNESCO, 2013](#), p. 3).

Latin and America and the Caribbean have not remained open to other models of education, as dictated by the job market. There are collaborations with North American universities and organizations through internationalization efforts championed by organization such as Inter-American Organization for Higher Education (IOHE). The TRESAL survey indicated a modest rise in interest in Asia and Australia as destinations for studying abroad. Twelve per cent of students showed interest in Australia and New Zealand and 11 per cent in Asia, while 18 per cent showed interest in the USA and Canada, and 17 per cent in Europe (Clark, 2014). Students' interest will continue to influence the cooperation needs of higher educational institutions, and it is not clear for how long the BP model will continue to influence former European colonies such as the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Conclusion

The perspective that the ulterior motive of the Bologna Process external dimension was to promote European hegemony remains debatable. Notwithstanding, the reform has

strengthened socioeconomic partnerships between European countries and between Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and Asia-Pacific. These partnerships are evidenced by the adoption of the Bologna models of education reform in these regions as well as in the European Union's funding of exchange programs between European universities and universities outside Europe. The spread of the reform has not only been along ex-colonial lines, as suggested by some research (MacGregor, 2008). Its influence has been worldwide – in regions where Europe's socio-political influence is not impactful; the Bologna Process has served as a model for regional integration (Clark, 2014). The internationalization of higher education has gained new momentum since 1999, thanks to the undeniable influence of the Bologna Process. The wide-ranging impact of the BP reform discussed in this paper seems to indicate that there is no end in sight yet regarding its influence. Scott (2009) argues that the global relevance of the Bologna Process will continue to grow with time. Clark (2014) analyzes the influence of the Bologna Process while underscoring its role as the model of regional integration in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The Bologna Process has made significant strides toward achieving the goal of rendering European higher education more competitive. This trend is likely to continue if the European Union and the European Commission, alongside countries such as France, Belgium and Germany continue to promote international higher education exchange and collaboration at institutional, governmental and regional levels.

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