20 YEARS OF THE BOLOGNA DECLARATION – A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE GLOBALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION REFORMS

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Abstract

One of the flagships of the Bologna declaration (1999), and consequently of the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), was the aim of increasing (students and staff) mobility, comparability and intergovernmental and inter-institutional cooperation in order to promote the internationalization of European higher education and the modernization of higher education institutions (HEI). However, and although the literature referring to the Bologna process has been fruitful, it is still challenging to find consensus on how these processes, (staff) mobility, intergovernmental and institutional cooperation, have been developing and on its impact on the internationalization, globalization and even modernization of higher education. Moreover, despite these buzzwords, often used interchangeably, have been addressed in the literature, there are several interpretations on their meaning. This paper attempts to enrich this discussion through a systematic literature review, showing how these processes have been approached in the literature under the Bologna process umbrella.

The literature evidences a substantial increase in the popularity of the process in non-EU countries. Concomitantly, the literature analysis shows a predominance of policy implementation, policy diffusion and policy convergence studies, mostly of empirical nature, reinforcing the image of the Bologna process as the visible face of Europeanization and internationalization phenomena. An interesting finding is the fact that although the Bologna process has been labelled as an intergovernmental cooperation initiative, few entries appear using the combination of these expressions: ‘Bologna process’ plus ‘intergovernmental cooperation’ (only 4), whose focus range from legal aspects to challenges and opportunities associated with the internationalisation of education.

Keywords: Bologna process, European Higher Education Area (EHEA), intergovernmental cooperation, policy implementation, Higher Education.

1 INTRODUCTION

Few higher education reforms have gained so much attention as the Bologna process did and still does. The 19th of June 2019 signals the 20th anniversary of the Bologna Declaration – a process that has been acknowledgeable as the visible face of internationalization and Europeanization processes of HEI and, consequently, of European integration. The Bologna process has been enacted as an intergovernmental initiative of several nation-states, which, among other objectives aimed at constructing and converging a common space of higher education [1, 2]. The Bologna process is thus the tangible face of these phenomena considering that it was capable of being extensible to those countries from other continents wishing to integrate the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and/or just aimed to modify their higher education systems, resembling them to the “European context” [3-5]. Nevertheless, one of the implications of this process is that Europeanization implies a greater de-nationalisation and integration of certain regulatory systems [6-8], despite all the barriers inherent to national political sensitivity and systemic diversity. In the same way that HEIs choose different international strategies to operate at the global and international levels, so the nation-states do in order to enhance their attractiveness in the Bologna space and to cope with European integration.

1 The Bologna Declaration was signed on the 19th of June 1999 by higher education Ministers of 29 European countries with the objective to establish a space (a common area of higher education) in which students (and Professors) could move freely between countries, using prior qualifications in one country as acceptable and comparable for pursuing further studies in another country. This would enhance Europe’s visibility, attractiveness and therefore making the old continent more competitive.
In fact, one of the flagships of the Bologna declaration (1999) and consequently of the creation of the EHEA was the aim of increasing (students and staff) mobility, comparability and intergovernmental and inter-institutional cooperation in order to promote European higher education (HE) internationalisation and modernization of higher education institutions (HEI) [9]. However, and although the literature referring to the Bologna process has been fruitful, it is still challenging to find consensus or integrated approaches on how these processes – (staff) mobility, intergovernmental and institutional cooperation, have been developing and on its impact on the internationalization, globalization and even modernization of higher education. Additionally, or simultaneously, despite these – often used interchangeably – buzzwords have been addressed in the literature, there are several interpretations on their meaning. As such, and attempting to find some consistency and even coherence in the literature regarding the Bologna process, we guided our analysis based on the following research questions: Which major political achievements are identified as being implemented in the EHEA? Which countries has the literature featured more in terms of (comparative) policy implementation in these last 20 years? Has the process triggered similar HE reforms in other countries besides the EHEA members? By other words, being the participation and cooperation of the signatory countries voluntary, which (political) mechanisms does the literature identify as being used by the Bologna process during these 2 decades that made it so visible and attractive at the global level?

This paper attempts to enrich this discussion through a systematic literature review, showing how these processes have been approached in the literature under the Bologna process umbrella, as explained in the next section.

2 METHODOLOGY

In order to explore how scholars have approached the research questions aforementioned, a systematic literature review using peer-reviewed-only material extracted from the Elsevier’s Scopus database was performed. The choice to search only on this database, instead of broadening the search to the Thomson Reuters Web of Science (WoS, e.g.) database, lays on the fact that Scopus is the largest abstract and citation database of peer-reviewed literature. Simultaneously, it contains the most important journals in terms of our research topic, i.e. it indexes 50% more journals in the social sciences than WoS [10-12]. Moreover, focusing only in this database allows to simplify and tune the focus of our work, as previous research in both databases [5, 13] evidenced the challenge to aggregate and make sense of the literature in this domain. In the field keywords, article title and abstract, we searched then combined expressions always attached with the term ‘Bologna process’, namely ‘policy implementation’; ‘modernization of higher education’; ‘policy reform’; ‘intergovernmental cooperation’; ‘institutional cooperation’; and ‘mobility’ in articles and chapters on the “Social Sciences”, “Business, Management and Accounting” and “Arts and Humanities scientific fields. These terms, chosen as key words to meet the research aims, have been frequently employed in the literature to characterize (or refer to) the Bologna Process.

Only peer-reviewed papers published in journals after the signature of the Declaration (1999) were selected to this literature review (Booth, 2016 #2059). The articles not available in English were excluded. From this search, 204 results were obtained. After removing the double entries, 146 remained for a deeper analysis. At a later stage, all the titles and abstracts were exhaustively screened. Whenever it seemed necessary, even the full text was examined in order to select the studies focused on the reforms proposed by the Bologna process and/or their implementation regarding the research questions. The final sample includes 89 journal articles. Figure 1 summarizes the research strategy.

![Figure 1. Research Strategy (main steps) of the Systematic Literature Review.](image)

From the documents obtained, the literature was initially analysed by identifying which other issues were discussed within the “Bologna umbrella” and how these have been approached.
3 RESULTS

3.1 Emerged Themes from the Literature Review

Once the articles were selected, the studies were categorized according to three dimensions: the main scope (or theme), the level of analysis, i.e. macro (global/international), meso (national) and/or micro (institutional) and the methodological approach (i.e. empirical or theoretical), which will be explained throughout this section.

The scope of the studies on Bologna Process in the last 20 years differs considerably. Nevertheless, the analysis of the articles revealed some emergent themes. With respect to this, the studies were grouped into categories, according to the main focus of each study. Table 1 shows the more frequent subjects that have attracted most of the academic interest in this domain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Keywords</th>
<th>Articles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy Implementation</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernization of Higher Education</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy reform</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intergovernmental cooperation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional cooperation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff mobility</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>204</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With respect to policy implementation, some references are made to the use of the Open Method of Coordination (OMC) as a mechanism to promote coordination and commitment among the signatory countries plus multilateral conferences. Curiously, few results pop up using the expression ‘intergovernmental cooperation’ (only 4), and the focus range from legal aspects [14] to challenges and opportunities associated with the internationalisation of education [15-17]. Additionally, the literature also evidences a substantial increase in the popularisation of the process in non-EU countries [18, 19]. The implementation of the curricula reforms, namely studies regarding the introduction of the 3 cycle-degree system as well as the challenges, difficulties and consequences associated to this change have been the focus of analysis of a significant number of empirical studies (N = 36, featuring curricular reform + policy implementation). These have contributed to assess the implementation of such higher reforms at both institutional and national levels.

In fact, a relevant number of articles can be considered to have a broad perspective, by contributing to the debate on the process of policy implementation. On this, the reform and changes on higher education policies, the processes of policy translation, policy transfer and policy diffusion, as well as associated phenomena related to the Europeanization of higher education systems and the homogenization/harmonization of higher education and science policies have been approached both theoretically and empirically.

Others themes that have been underlying the implementation process of the Bologna Declaration and consequently that have attracted scholars’ interest pertain to the establishment of the Qualifications Framework, to Quality and to Institutional and Inter-governmental cooperation (cf. table 2). The latter has been approached in a theoretical way, e.g. cooperation among HEI and their strategies of cooperation) given that empirical studies targeting cooperation initiatives are scarce. Controversially, this theme — inter-institutional cooperation — represents it itself an interesting object of analysis as it emerges associated with other issues that have gained attention in the literature of several scientific domains (e.g. internationalization, links between universities and industry, and between different types of HEI) without referring or specifically mention the expression ‘institutional cooperation’.

It should be mentioned that the classification between ‘empirical’ and ‘theoretical’ was defined by the authors on the basis that all the published literature that emerged from direct data collection was labeled as empirical. The opposite process, the literature which did not went through any form of direct data collection was considered theoretical.
In what concerns the level of analysis that these articles focus, the studies were classified as Macro, Meso and Micro. Studies classified as having a macro focus of analysis addressed the adoption and transfer of European standards, guidelines and recommendations not only to the EHEA countries but also to export these Europeanization trends globally. Literature on the use of the OMC and its diffusion to the higher education sector is an example of data that falls within several categories of analysis: policy implementation studies focusing the macro level, being some of these studies empirical, while others have a more theoretical approach.

The meso studies focus on the implementation of the Bologna process at the national level, i.e. at the system level. These studies entail frequently a comparative perspective with other countries or even with the European guidelines. Literature exploring the meso level seems to have a strong focus on this level of approach, namely in addressing the themes related to curriculum reforms, syllabus, changes in teaching-learning paradigms, or challenges and difficulties associated with the implementation of the objectives of the Bologna declaration and subsequent Communiqués. Policy implementation and policy diffusion are also keywords often used to characterize studies at the meso level.

Finally, the micro level concerns the changes at institutional level, focusing on HEI statuses, internal regulations and policies. Most of them can be classified as being empirical (e.g. institutional re-ordering of disciplines; re-organization of the staff; perceptions and reactions of the staff regarding the implementation process; institutional change; leadership/management/governance styles in a reform/change context; etc.).

The topic of internationalization is frequently associated with mobility – mostly targeting students’ mobility and later on staff (teaching and non-teaching staff).

Interesting enough is the fact that a significant number articles referred to the new vocabulary and grammar that emerged with the Bologna Declaration and subsequent Communiqués [13, 20, 21] and the confusion created both at the system (meso) and institutional (micro) levels [22]. With Bologna, a new language emerged for the signatory countries and for those wanting to join the pledge.

Table 3 shows the main themes that emerged after the initial searches, grouped by the level of analysis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Macro</th>
<th>Meso</th>
<th>Micro</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum reform</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy implementation (broad perspective)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualifications</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internationalization</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>27</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Literature Evolution

An interesting finding that emerged from the literature selected is the analysis of the Bologna process themes over a temporal spectrum. By other words, we analyzed the popularity of these emergent themes over a time frame that ranged between 2000-2019, i.e. the last 19 years. We did not consider the year 1999 as this was the year of the signature of the Declaration.

Figure 1 illustrates thus on the evolution of the interest focus of the Bologna process literature over the years. Articles focusing on policy implementation have been the central focus of studies related with Bologna process, very likely to the complexity of relationships between governments and HEI this entails and the changes created at the meso and micro levels. Moreover, policy implementation (as well as internationalization) also point to the Europeanization of higher education and science policies, and related aspects of the establishment of the EHEA and the European Research Area (ERA).

Concomitantly, studies on curricula reforms and on the restructuring of the degree system are more popular in the first decade after the implementation process, having declined in number (and popularity) in the last five years. This finding did not arrive as a total surprise, considering that the implementation of a two cycle, shorter degree system (and later on, a three cycle degree system), as well as the curricular reforms and changes associated to the teaching-learning paradigm, were the main and initial objectives of the Bologna declaration. These reforms forced Ministries and HEI to enforce significant changes in their legislation and internal organization and statutes in order to enhance comparability of curricula and degrees, leading then to political convergence [23, 24].

Additionally, the relevance of the studies on Quality and Qualifications (European Qualifications Framework) became more visible after 2010. However, it is important to highlight that it was already in 2005 that the Bergen Communiqué underlined the complementarity between the overarching framework of the EHEA and the framework for life long learning (LLL) qualifications (which encompass general and vocational education, and training) as it was being developed within the EU and among participating countries. In the Bergen Communiqué it was also asked the European Commission “fully to consult all parties to the Bologna Process as work progresses” [25]. These events help to understand why ‘policy implementation themes’ have gained constant attention from scholars, policy makers and other stakeholders, in the last twenty years.

In what concerns cooperation, as previously referred, there is a lack of studies on these subject in the latest period of analysis. However, it should be remembered that the key word ‘cooperation’ was always searched associated with the main concept of ‘Bologna process’. Other combination of words led to fruitful research in terms of cooperation, as mentioned earlier on.

In what concerns the methodological approach, both types of studies – empirical and theoretical – are present in this literature review. However, the empirical analysis overtakes theoretical material for most part of the time spectrum. As a matter of fact, theoretical studies appear to face a decreasing trend as the following figure evidences.
3.3 Geographical Focus

As mentioned above, one can observe an increase of empirical literature regarding the implementation of the Bologna process in the European signatory countries. A relevant number of articles featuring the implementation process of the Bologna declaration (or any aspect of the process) on a specific country or establishing comparative analysis between two or more member states are very popular in the literature. In that regard, countries such as Portugal, Germany and Romania have served as case studies in order to understand what has been the impact of the Bologna process in national higher education systems (and HEI). Additionally, the case of Eastern Europe is frequently analyzed taking into account the claim for the modernization and marketization of higher education systems in the post-communism context. In fact, the discourses on the need to modernize higher education have found fertile soil in many signatory countries, legitimizing governments to push the process forward.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the impact of the Bologna process went beyond European boundaries, providing that not only European nations are involved in the EHEA, but also other geographically disperse countries as the case of Kazakhstan. Despite its initial European character, the Bologna Process has inspired reforms in higher education at a global level, strengthening Europeanization and internationalization phenomena. Although not taking formally part of the EHEA, regions such as the Asia-Pacific, Latin America and even some African countries, have been influenced by Europeanization trends and European guidelines and soft law when applying the OMC to implement change at the system and institutional levels. This is thus why the Bologna process is considered the visible face of internationalization and it may be well considered as a ‘reform model’ globally spread through the transfer and diffusion of ‘best practices’ and (inter)governmental policy cooperation. As a matter of fact, Europe has the explicit ambition to follow a ‘global strategy’ by impacting on international reforms and cooperation as far higher education is concerned. It is expected thus that this global influence may place Europe in a strategic leading role in terms of visibility and enhancement of knowledge societies, reinforcing the Lisbon strategy goals.
CONCLUSIONS

Two decades after the signature of the Bologna declaration, and being the participation and cooperation of the signatory countries voluntary, we were interested in understanding how the literature on the Bologna process has been approached. Ultimately, we analysed which main themes are associated with the Bologna process in an attempt to shed light on the visibility of the process in the last twenty years. Our findings are based on a systematic literature review using peer-reviewed-only material, analysed through several steps and variables. From an initial search of 204 articles referencing the key words chosen, the key themes have been re-defined according to the results of this initial search, and analysed according to the following criteria: i) the focus of analysis and the evolution of the scope on the literature of the Bologna process along the last 19 years; the level of analysis (i.e. macro, meso and micro) of these studies; the evolution of the methodological approach over the years; and the geographical focus, i.e. the countries that have been featured in the literature on this domain. These criteria were chosen bearing in mind the research questions addressed: which major political achievements are identified as being implemented in the EHEA? Which countries has the literature featured more in terms of (comparative) policy implementation in these last 20 years? And, whether the process has triggered similar higher education reforms in other countries besides the EHEA? In fact, the selection of key words as well as the elaboration of research questions were absolutely necessary due to the proliferation of literature featuring the expression ‘Bologna process’, and therefore helped us to make sense of the literature in this domain.

The findings evidence a significant increase in the popularity and attraction of the process in non-EU countries, frequently evoking the need to modernise their higher education systems and HEI while
acquiring some competitive leverage. As a matter of fact, this popularisation shows that not only did the Bologna process created a new higher education and policy language, but it has also induced competition among signatory countries, as the European Union soft law methodology of implementation kept track and ranking the signatory members in terms of the speed objectives have been achieved. These benchmarking initiatives, which have classified countries in two levels of implementation categories, the pioneers and the laggards [20, 27, 28], are thus responsible for much of the literature on policy implementation at all levels of analysis. These data evidence the emergence of a new paradigm for higher education and for HEI, and signalling the Bologna process as the visible face of the internationalization of higher education. Concomitantly, and focusing on the micro level, a deeper analysis of the literature reflected the challenges and difficulties in translating international guidelines and national legislation to the institutional level. This analysis allowed us to reflect not only on the countries that the literature has featured more in terms of (comparative) policy implementation, but also on the changes and difficulties faced in implementing the Bologna objectives. It is thus understandable that the first decade of the Bologna process addressed the hassle related to the change dynamics of curricular and degree reforms.

It should also be mentioned that the twentieth anniversary of the Bologna process signals the commitment to the Lisbon strategy, reinforcing the need (and responsibility) of the EHEA and ERA to develop“(…) policies that encourage and support higher education institutions to fulfill their social responsibility and contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society through enhancing intercultural understanding, civic engagement and ethical awareness, as well as ensuring equitable access to higher education” [29].

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