



Quality assurance in the European policy arena

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Abstract

Our paper investigates the emergence, development and contested nature of quality assurance (QA) in the European policy arena as part and parcel of the Bologna Process. We conceptualise our paper on the background of the study of multi-level and multi-actor dynamics between national, inter-governmental and supranational policies; we discuss the changing ideational framing of QA in the European policy arena, and attempts at European norm-setting and standardisation. QA in the Bologna Process moved from a non-binding inter-governmental agreement towards monitored coordination and became embedded in the competitive turn in European higher education policy stressing an instrumental view of the university. QA policies unfold coercive pressure for convergence alongside soft templates and prototypes of ‘best practice’. The impressive architecture of Bologna leaves, however, ample room for national and institutional design in policy implementation and a variety of preferences and interests of actors at different levels. © 2014 Policy and Society Associates (APSS). Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Quality assurance; Europe; Policy arena; Ideational framing; Norm-setting; Standardisation

1. Introduction

European higher education has shown itself to be no stranger to change. During the last three decades, the sector has been included in transformations of political systems in Central and Eastern Europe subsequently joining European public sector reform movements that also affect higher education. Since the 1990s, the rate of change has accelerated to unprecedented levels, largely on the shoulders of two European political key agendas: the Bologna Process, whose objectives are to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and to make European higher education more competitive and attractive in a globalising world, and the European Union’s (EU) growth and innovation strategies (formerly the Lisbon Strategy), which seek to reform the continent’s higher education and research systems into a more powerful motor for the European knowledge economy. The ‘Modernization Agenda’ of the European Commission (EC) could be added as the third key development, bringing together the reform agendas of the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy and linking them up with a New Public Management (NPM)-inspired agenda for the modernisation of higher education institutions.

In the following, our main focus will be on the Bologna Process and its links to the emergence and unfolding of quality assurance (QA) on the inter-governmental and supra-national policy agenda. QA entered the higher education

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agenda of different European countries in the 1980s and 1990s, usually due to a combination of factors, including fiscal limitations during a time of recession preventing further growth of higher education budgets, the enlarged role of higher education for an increasing variety of functions in the emerging knowledge economies, and the ensuing ‘massification’ of higher education which pushed national governments over their span of control with traditional policy tools (especially regulation and line-item budgeting), thus giving rise to the ‘evaluative state’ (Neave, 1994, 1998; van Vught, 1989) and a variety of reforms all called NPM (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). In 1992, with the Maastricht Treaty on the European Union, the EU began to expand its interest in higher education beyond facilitating mobility and opening the European labour markets. Ever since, the European level has played a role in QA for higher education, building up quickly to the intensity of the Bologna Process. Three issues will be addressed in this article, which together produce a coherent analysis of QA in the European policy arena.

First, we take an actor-centred perspective in mapping the European policy arena as a multi-actor and multi-level playing field (see Enders, 2004; Finnemore, 1996; Martens & Wolf, 2009; Ravinet, 2008; Witte, 2006). We look at the role of national and supra-national actors involved in the policy process, new actors entering the policy arena or emerging out of the policy process itself, the role of preferences and interests of these political actors, and how the European arena is mobilised for national policies while also unfolding coercive power among countries.

Second, we address the ideational framing of QA in the European policy arena, most namely the influence of neo-liberal, NPM-inspired conceptions of employability and accountability and the influence of policy narratives around globalisation and international competition. ‘Shifts in framing’ points to the role of ideational factors for explaining policy-making trajectories and policy transformations (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Ferlie, Musselin, & Andresani, 2008). Authors following a discursive approach (Fisher, 2003; Radaelli, 2005; Stone, 1997) show the influence of causal narratives in the conception of new reforms, and how new actors can gain influence because they provide new narratives of change and success. The study of ideational change might also point to deeper ‘discursive turns’ in the social re-construction of the role higher education is expected to fulfil within society and economy.

Third, we look at the emergence, development and eventually the institutionalisation of templates and prototypes for QA in higher education in the European policy arena as attempts for norm-setting and standardisation. Following Room (2000), we see international standard-setting as an attempt to deal with challenges of globalisation in its various inter-related forms of social globalisation, market globalisation, and political globalisation. More specifically, we build on a useful distinction between programmatic elements of standardisation and the technological or operational elements introduced by Power (1997) when characterising NPM-policies. While the programmatic element refers to the ideas, aims and objectives of a certain policy, the technological element refers to the specific tasks or routines of which this policy consists.

2. Multi-actor, multi-level policy dynamics

Higher education policy in Europe has been and is an arena where contestations take place between national policies, inter-governmental policies and supra-national European policies about their political authority as well as about the main principles guiding the course of action. On the one hand, the European Union, and before that the European Economic Community since the Treaty of Rome, 1957, focused on stimulating the emergence of a European labour market and saw education as (vocational) training of the future labour force. On the other hand, nation states in Europe defended education as a policy area within their own sovereignty, arguing that it was the main vehicle to transmit national values and national culture. This antagonism played out differently at different moments of time while it remains a fruitful way of looking at developments in education and especially in higher education policy up to this day. Other major players in the arena include stakeholder organisations that emerged mostly with the growth of the EU to lobby for their constituencies directly at the European level, taking in stride other European cooperative organisations or arenas such as the Council of Europe, the OECD or UNESCO’s regional activities.¹ Europe is an arena in which multiple actors, with authorities at multiple levels, interact to influence the path that higher education will take in the future. Perspectives, powers and possibilities of actors in this arena have changed over time.

¹ In recent years, networks of usually around one or a few dozen higher education institutions have also emerged on the scene, but for the sake of our discussion, we can mostly ignore these smaller players. We will also ignore sub-national players, although we recognise that some European countries have devolved authority regarding higher education to sub-national authorities (e.g. Belgium, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom).

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