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FEATURE

Exploring research potential: Bologna reform and Europeanisation beyond the European Union in the case of Norway

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Exploring research potential: Bologna reform and Europeanisation beyond the European Union in the case of Norway

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Synopsis

The aim of this article is to explore research potential of the theme: the role of the Bologna reform in the Europeanisation beyond the European Union (EU) in the case of Norway. The investigation of such potential is conducted through a relevant literature review and the identification of research questions that have not yet been addressed in the literature. This article serves as an important step towards developing a proposal for future research in this area.

Key words: Bologna Process; Europeanisation; Europeanisation beyond the EU; Norway; research questions

Introduction

The aim of this feature is to explore the research potential of the theme: the role of the Bologna reform in Europeanisation beyond the European Union (EU) in the case of Norway. Europeanisation is seen here as the institutionalisation of different rules with the help of European international organisations (Vukasovik, 2013).

The investigation of the research potential of this theme is conducted here through a relevant literature review and the identification of research questions that have not yet been addressed in the literature. This feature serves as an important step towards developing a proposal for future research in this area.

The analysis below consists of two main sections. I explain first the essence of the Bologna Process. Afterwards, I briefly review literature in three specific areas related to Bologna and Europeanisation with the aim to highlight the gaps. The feature concludes with synthesising the analysis of the gaps in concrete research questions.

Background information about the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process, or Bologna, is a famous and quite influential European project that targets the facilitation of international cooperation in the field of higher education. This project

aims to build a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that would be internationally competitive through such *action lines* as: the adoption of a system of credits, study cycles, diploma supplement, qualifications frameworks, student-centred education, lifelong learning, the promotion of student and faculty mobility (EHEA, 2014).

This is not an exhaustive list of the Bologna action lines as the Bologna Process has been developing since 1998. It was started by the Ministers of Education of the United Kingdom, Italy, France and Germany who called upon other states to join them in that initiative. In response, many other EU states and some of their nearby non-EU countries volunteered to join the Bologna Process and develop the EHEA (Corbett, 2011). There are currently 47 countries working on Bologna (EHEA, 2014).

Bologna is regarded in the scholarship on European higher education policy not only as being about the *harmonisation of higher education structures* in the participating countries through a range of action lines, it is also viewed as a platform for *promoting common European identity* which is based on the values of democracy and human rights (Papatsiba, 2009; Zgaga, 2009). In addition, Bologna is also considered to be a tool for *facilitating economic competitiveness of the EHEA* by producing new highly skilled and flexible workers (Brine, 2006).

These three main facets of Bologna – harmonisation of higher education structures, facilitation of common identity and economic competitiveness of the EHEA – serve as pointers to the idea that Bologna is about higher education and, at the same time, it can well be much more than that.

The link between education and politics is not anything that one would find as a surprise. Education is a political endeavour. Education reflects wider political ideas, and it also shaped by politics to an extent (Meyer, 2000). Since the Bologna Process is originally a project of the EU that gradually grew to encompass many other countries, the meaning and role of Europeanisation is crucial to investigate in Bologna.

Gaps and potential contribution

There is scarce literature that explicitly looks at the link between Bologna and Europeanisation. The main focus of the literature that mentions Europeanisation in Bologna is on presenting Europeanisation along with other changes as positive developments in the countries during Bologna reforms (e.g., Vukasovic, 2013). This author also defines what Europeanisation in Bologna means. It is 'the institutionalisation of formal and informal rules

developed in a process that involves a supranational or an international body, e.g., the EU, the Council of Europe... or the Bologna Follow-up Group' (Vukasovik, 2013: p.312).

Therefore, research is needed to investigate the role of the Bologna reform in Europeanisation. Norway is an interesting case for this kind of research because this country is located in geographical Europe and Europeanisation has been developing in the country, albeit without formal membership in the EU (Fossum, 2009). Such research is important as it would make a contribution to existing literature in the following three specific areas:

- Bologna in Norway;
- Norwegian Europeanisation;
- Europeanisation beyond the EU.

Bologna in Norway

Research about Bologna in Norway is focused on the implementation of the Bologna action lines, similarly to research about Bologna more widely in the EHEA (Ravinet, 2008). Kehm et al (2010) conducted an exemplary study of this type of research in Norway. This study investigates the achievements and problems in the implementation of the two-cycled system of studies in Norway (and Germany). There is also a group of authors who look at some processes in the Norwegian higher education that accompany Bologna. These processes change the structure of higher education and the way higher education is delivered to students. For instance, Ljosland (2005) maintains that English emerges in Norway as a necessary medium of communication in order to implement the action lines of Bologna. Dahl et al (2009) investigate the change of the grading scale for measuring students' academic success. This innovation came along as a so-called by-product of the implementation of the Bologna system of credits. Dysthe and Webler (2010) explore a change in the pedagogical practice which increasingly becomes more student-oriented.

All of these studies analyse primarily higher education and do not focus specifically on Bologna as a wider political process. None of these studies focuses on the political side of Bologna for Norway and its potential for the Europeanisation of the country. The research theme that I am proposing in this article aims to fill in this gap in the literature about Bologna in Norway.

Norwegian Europeanisation

Norway has developed close economic ties with the EU countries through its membership in the European Free Trade Association and the European Economic Area, and Norwegian politics is guided by the European values of human rights, democracy and the respect of diversity (Claes, 2002). However, membership in the EU has not been unanimously sought in

this country. It has been perhaps the most politically divisive issue in the country (Fossum, 2009). There have been two referenda on the Norwegian EU membership, and in both cases the question has been turned down largely to preserve Norwegian independence in protecting its socio-democratic welfare system. The question of Norwegian EU membership has been removed from the political agenda, and instead of joining the EU, 'tight incorporation without a formal membership' has been developing (Fossum, 2009: p.3).

There are numerous studies on this cooperation between Norway and the EU in different policy fields. For instance, Moravcsik (2014) explores the attack on the European-ness of Norway in the massacre in Oslo and Utoya back in 2011. Claes (2002) explores the process of Europeanisation of Norway through the development of its energy market. There is also research into Europeanisation of Norway through adopting EU guidelines for research and education (Trondal, 2002). This study does not investigate the Bologna Process; it focuses on the EU research and education quality assurance policy.

Research about Norwegian Europeanisation mirrors to an extent the gap in the wider literature on Europeanisation beyond the EU, briefly analysed below. Research about Norwegian Europeanisation focuses more on the economy and cooperation between EU governance bodies and non-EU countries. Shifting the research focus to Bologna is productive in terms of exploring a different route for Europeanisation – cooperation among multiple countries in the EHEA. This cooperation could have political weight for creating a source of common ideological space for EU and non-EU countries that has the potential to have a significant impact on participating states, not limited to their higher education policies per se.

Europeanisation beyond the EU

Much literature has been written on Europeanisation beyond the EU. This literature focuses on different regions, such as, for instance, European Neighbourhood Policy countries (Kochenov, 2011), post-Soviet states (Börzel & Pamuk, 2011), geographical Europe beyond the borders of the EU (Claes, 2012). These studies are focused mainly on the economic side of Europeanisation and the cooperation of EU governance bodies and non-EU countries. The mechanisms of Europeanisation vary significantly across countries, according to Schimmelfennig (2010). This scholar summarises key 'conditions of effectiveness' of Europeanisation beyond the EU –market power and supranational regulation.

Evidently, the studies on Europeanisation beyond the EU do not explore the place of Bologna as a potential mechanism of Europeanisation in countries that do not belong to the EU. The research in the Norwegian context that I am proposing is important because it would inform

our understanding of the broader picture of Europeanisation beyond the boundaries of the EU.

Conclusion

Literature review in the three specific areas above (Bologna in Norway, Norwegian Europeanisation, Europeanisation beyond the EU) can be used to generate the following research questions:

- How has the process of Bologna reform been unfolding in Norway?
- In what ways does Bologna reform contribute to and shape Europeanisation in the country?
- How does Bologna reform in Norway inform our understanding of Europeanisation beyond the EU?

The analysis of literature in this article has demonstrated a significant research potential in the area related to the role of Bologna reform in Europeanisation beyond the EU in the case of Norway. The research questions that the discussion in this article have yielded form an important step towards the beginning of research in this area.

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