Analysing the differential impact of the Bologna Process – theoretical and methodological considerations on transnational communication and cross-national policy convergence

Torben Heinze and Christoph Knill, University of Konstanz

Paper presented at the ECPR joint sessions of workshops
Helsinki 2007
7th -12th May
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI, FINLAND

(First Draft, 16th April 2007)

(Please do not quote without the authors' permission!)

1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1
2 Sketching the Bologna Process............................................................................................ 2
3 Transnational communication as driving force ................................................................. 6
4 Mapping national conditions of cross-national policy convergence.................................. 11
5 Towards a research design .................................................................................................. 14
6 Conclusion .......................................................................................................................... 23
7 References....................................................................................................................... 25
"The Bologna process has brought about more change in higher education than any other international instrument or policy has done before."


1 Introduction

For a long time higher education policy was not part of the European agenda. Even in the 1980s when Cooperation in Higher Education on a European level increased with the development of an information network on Education in Europe (EURYDICE) or the introduction of mobility programmes like ERASMUS (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students), a deeper integration and collaboration in higher education policy or even the creation of a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA) seemed unthinkable. European Policies in higher education were almost completely restricted to EU-mobility programmes (see Wit/Verhoeven 2001; Beukel 2001; Walter 2006b: ch. 4). This picture changed considerably by 1999. 29 countries responsible for higher education signed the Bologna declaration denoting the actual start of the so-called Bologna Process (see Wende/Huisman 2003).1

With this document the ministers agreed on establishing an EHEA by 2010. Regarding higher education policy this can be described as a quantum leap in the history of Higher Education as this policy field was usually characterized by a "traditional resistance [...] to any harmonisation policy" Hackl 2001: 2). Notwithstanding the legally-unbinding and intergovernmental character of the declaration, different reforms related to the process have been initiated in all of the signatory countries showing that "[...] governments have developed policies that fit the European agenda towards converging systems of higher education" (Huisman/Wende 2004: 355). Yet the observable degree of domestic change varies remarkably (see Dittrich et al. 2004; McKenna et al. 2005; Tauch 2004; Wende 2001: 435ff; Farrington 2005). This finding comes along with varying degrees of cross-national policy convergence (see Luijten-Lub et al. 2005: 158f; Witte 2006).2 Considering the diversity of European higher education systems this came to no surprise.

Still two questions stand out concerning the Bologna Process. First, what is the impact of the Bologna Process on cross-national policy convergence in higher education? And second, what national factors account for the differential impact of the Bologna Process? How do we explain variations in observable effects of the Bologna Process so that we can account for different patterns of policy convergence?

Despite the growing interest of policy makers in higher education issues (especially on an international scale) empirical-analytical studies based on a well-developed theoretical and methodological framework remain clearly more the exception than the rule (see Goedegebuure/Vught 1996; Slaughter 2001: 390f; McLendon 2003). Even broadly discussed topics in higher education research3 like the potential convergence of European higher education systems (e.g. Meek et al. 1996; Hackl 2001; Bleiklie 2001; Rakic 2001; Wächter 2004: 9; Witte 2006) suffer from a thin empirical and comparative

---

1 Some authors claim that this turn around had already begun with the so-called Lisbon-Convention in 1997 (Reuter et al. 2003) or the Sorbonne Declaration from 1998 (Hackl 2001).
2 Generally cross-nation policy-convergence is described as "the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances" (Kerr 1983: 3).
3 For overviews on the discipline of higher education research see Altbach (2002) and Teichler (1996a, 2005).
basis for understanding the Bologna Process (Witte 2004: 406). Most preliminary work is restricted to various scattered country-specific progress reports and rather descriptive accounts of the reforms in various specific countries (e.g. Malan 2004; Pechar/Pellert 2004; Tauch 2004). Mission orientated research and comparative surveys conducted within the Bologna Process lack a theory-driven analytical framework (e.g. Haug/Tauch 2001, Reichert/Tauch 2003, Tauch/Rauvargers 2002). Comparative and theory-driven work and on this issue can be found only recently (Witte 2006). This paper aims to address these problems by dealing with theoretical and methodological questions concerning the national effects of the Bologna Process and the role national factors play in determining the impact of these effects.

Altogether the purpose of the paper is to serve as a starting point for future research – both as a guide for systematic and comparative empirical work on higher education, but also for further theoretical and methodological reasoning concerning research on (higher) education policy. As higher education research so far particularly lacks an approach allowing for a competitive and systematic falsification of theoretical arguments by clearly indicating testable and specific hypothesis as well as variables behind the research design (Goedegebuure/Vught 1996) we propose to fall back on neighbouring disciplines, namely social science to improve and enhance the analysis (Slaughter 2001: 398; Altbach 2002: 154; Teichler 1996a: 433, 2005: 448). Several strands of research have to be considered – namely literature on Europeanization as well as insights and approaches of studies dealing with cross-national policy convergence. Taking into account the non-obligatory and mainly intergovernmental character of the Bologna Process the main focus of the paper is on factors related to the effects of transnational communication. The inherent goal is to extend the research agenda on higher education (McLendon 2003: 184ff) and to leave behind the restriction of to analyse only a few cases by striving for a research design that allows for systematic testing and sufficient explanations of cross-national policy convergence at the interface between the Bologna Process and domestic factors.

To do so, we begin by providing an overview of the Bologna Process, describing its programmatic development and current governance structure. This gives as a basic understanding of the Process. Subsequently we outline the causal mechanism underlying the national impact of the Bologna Process. These considerations are based on the assumption that the Bologna Process can essentially be described as a process of transnational communication. After theorizing the Bologna Process we proceed by mapping national factors accounting for the differential national effects of the Bologna Process. This includes a closer look at the concept and types of cross-national policy convergence. From our point of view this task turns out to be essential if one wants to choose potential national explanations for different degrees of convergence (especially in the context of the Bologna Process). Ultimately we try to draw up a research design based on the preceding considerations. This endeavour is not solely based on the formulation of hypotheses, but also deals with a crucial methodological issue: how to deal with the qualitative nature of most of the data to be collected for the analysis of cross-national policy convergence? For this purpose we try to elaborate on innovative methodological insights from comparative political science like the Method of Paired Comparison or Configurational Comparative Methods. This does not entail a comprehensive overview on these innovations but a short introduction on how the analysis of cross-national policy convergence might benefit from these tools.

2 Sketching the Bologna Process

The development of the Bologna Process is well circumscribed “by a constant movement towards widening” (Wächter 2004: 267). First, the sheer number of involved actors and organisations has

---

4 Diploma thesis like Heinze (2005) are not considered.
changed over the years. Starting with 29 members in 1999, the number of participating countries has increased to 45 in 2005. Even the EU-Commission became a fully-fledged member of the Process. Also more and more stakeholder-organisations are participating in the process. Some are acting as permanent observers and consultative members, others are just partner organisations who are informed and invited to Bologna seminars and ministerial meetings. Second, the number and quality of objectives spelt out has changed over the years. Since the meeting in Bologna in 1999 additional goals have been formulated. Furthermore ministers adopted more specific frameworks and action lines for realising the EHEA. This incorporates Standards for European Quality Assurance as well as a Framework for Qualifications (Bergen-Communiqué 2005: 22). Last but not least, the formal dimension of the Bologna Process itself has been strengthened. At the beginning of the Process it remained a rather loose coupling between different national and only a few transnational actors. By now Bologna has become a quite complex process described as a transnational regime in higher education (see Walter 2006a: 194; Nagel 2006: 79).

2.1 Governance Structure

Originally ministers had only agreed on meeting at bi-annual conferences where the signatory states were supposed to present the state of implementation in their countries. Based on the adoption of additional goals and action lines, this rather spurious structure has been modified at the following ministerial meetings in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) and Bergen (2005) to guarantee an adequate coordination and monitoring of the national adjustment process (see Reuter et al. 2003; Reinalda/Kulesza 2005; Witte 2006: ch. 5; Walter 2006a). By now the formal structure of interaction entails not only the bi-annual ministerial meetings, at which the implementation of joint objectives is addressed and programmatic declarations and communiqués are unanimously determined by all full members, but above all the so-called follow-up structure at the European level (see Figure 1). At the heart of the follow-up structure lies the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) that is formally responsible for the overall steering of the process and the preparation of the ministerial meeting (e.g. by drafting the Communiqué). This also entails concrete actions for the realization of the Bologna objectives by adopting a work programme as well as informing and reporting to the ministers in charge of Higher Education in the signatory countries. These general tasks are updated each ministerial meeting with more concrete guidelines and operating instructions (e.g. to develop criteria for stocktaking). The BFUG consists of representatives of the various Bologna countries and the European Union and is advised by Europe-wide organisations, like university associations [European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), Education International (EI) Pan-European Structure], students’ associations [National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB)], business [Union of Industrial and Employers’ Confederations of Europe (UNICE)], the Council of Europe (CoE), UNESCO/CEPES, and topic-orientated network organisations [European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA), European Network of Information Centres (ENIC)/National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC)].

The work of the BFUG is supported by several institutions. First, the BFUG can build upon country reports provided by the National Bologna Groups dealing with the state of implementation of the Bologna objectives in the corresponding higher education systems. Second, the BFUG is entitled to delegate tasks to the Bologna Follow-up Board for fulfilling its responsibilities. This smaller unit

---

5 By now Albania, Latvia, Andorra, Liechtenstein, Armenia, Lithuania, Austria, Luxembourg, Azerbaijan, Malta, Belgium, Moldova, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Norway, Croatia, Poland, Cyprus, Portugal, Czech Republic, Romania, Denmark, Russian Federation, Estonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Finland, Slovak Republic, France, Slovenia, Georgia, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Greece, Switzerland, Holy See, "the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", Hungary, Turkey, Iceland, Ukraine, Ireland, United Kingdom, Italy.
consists of the Bologna Representative coming from the country hosting the next ministerial meeting, three Bologna representatives elected by the BFUG on a yearly basis, the EC as well as representatives from the preceding, the current as well as the following EU-Presidency. Other organizations also take part in the BFUG Board as consultative members (EUA, CoE, EURASHE, ESIB). Apart from drawing recommendations for the BFUG the Board is also responsible for overseeing the work between meetings of the BFUG as well as reporting to the BFUG as decision-making body below the ministerial level. Third, both BFUG and Board can support and organise workshops. Experts on higher education and policy-makers are invited to these official Bologna Seminars collecting and preparing information on questions regarding the implementation of the Bologna objectives. Furthermore partner organisations like the European Association for International Education (EAIE) and the Council of European Professional and Managerial Staff (EUROCADRES) can provide expertise. Fourth, the BFUG as well as the Board can use an additional option for obtaining expertise and policy-specific knowledge by convening ad hoc Working Groups if necessary. In addition to advising on special subjects (e.g. quality assurance) working groups might also carry out certain tasks like preparing stocktaking reports to benchmark the different countries. Fifth, a Bologna Secretariat has been installed and is located in the corresponding host country. Apart from organising the ministerial meetings and drafting the Official General Report (has to be approved by the BFUG), the secretariat supports the BFUG by coordinating its activities.

**Figure 1: The Organisation of the Bologna Process**

Source: Own drawing based on Witte (2006), Walter (2006b: 114) and information provided by the website of the Bologna Secretariat.
2.2 European guidelines
The Bologna Declaration included several objectives for realising the EHEA by 2010 (see Bologna-Declaration 1999):

- adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement\(^6\));
- adoption of a degree system essentially based on two main cycles;
- establishment of a credit-point-system [e.g. the European Credit Point Transfer System (ECTS)];
- promotion of mobility (student and staff);
- promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with the main focus on developing comparable criteria and methodologies;
- promotion of the European dimension in higher education (particularly with regard to curricular affairs).

At the following ministerial meetings these programmatic goals have been affirmed and extended. In Prague the participation of stakeholders like universities and students, an improvement in the competitive capability and attractiveness of Higher Education as well as the promotion of life-long-learning has been added (Prag-Kommuniqué 2001). The Berlin-Communiqué provided the integration of postgraduate study programmes into the Bologna Process as accumulative cycle structuring degrees (Berlin-Communiqué 2003). In Berlin the ministers called for three intermediate priorities to be set for the following two years: the introduction of an effective system of quality assurance; to adopt a degree system based on the proposed two cycles; enhancing the systems for recognizing degrees and periods of studies. The BFUG was asked to coordinate the process and to report on the implementation of the goals and action lines set in the Communiqué plus to prepare the upcoming ministerial meeting. In particular the BFUG was charged to monitor the Project "Standards for Quality Assurance" by the ENQA as well as to develop an overarching framework of qualifications. Also a systematic stocktaking process on the achievement of the implementation goals had to be organised (see Berlin-Communiqué 2003). The Bologna Secretariat was then commissioned to write the official general report for the next conference and to take over the administrative and operational responsibility for the next ministers' conference in Bergen (see Witte 2006: 141; Nyborg 2003).

At the next ministerial meeting two policy models have been adopted: the European Quality Assurance Standards proposed by the ENQA and a Framework of Qualifications for the European Higher Education Area (Bergen-Communiqué 2005: 3f). Once again several intermediate priorities have been identified that should be completely implemented by 2007: a quality assurance system satisfying the adopted standards and guidelines; the implementation of the approved framework of qualifications; the awarding and recognition of joint degrees (also at the doctorate level); creating opportunities for lifelong learning (including the development of procedures for the recognition of prior learning). To accomplish these goals and objectives the BFUG was charged with additional tasks to be carried out until the next conference in London in 2007. The BFUG has to report on the implementation and further development of the overarching framework for qualifications. This also applies to the overarching framework for quality assurance. Together with other interested stakeholders like the EUA the BFUG shall work on basic principles for integrating doctoral programmes as to fit two-tiered undergraduate degrees. There is also a need for further elaboration on the external dimension of the Bologna Process, i.e. cooperating with non-European regions, and how

\(^6\) The Diploma Supplement is an instrument developed for the European mobility programmes. Basically it is a datasheet describing type and content of study programmes attended by a student as well as the level of qualification reached.
to extend the Bologna Process beyond 2010. Last but not least, the BFUG is asked to continue and widen the stocktaking process by surveying comparable data on staff and student mobility and the social and economic situation of students (Ibid.).

3 Transnational communication as driving force

Several authors describe the Bologna Process as a "European response" (Wende 2001; Wende/Huisman 2003) to global demands and challenges posed by globalization processes. Despite the importance of international factors (see Enders 2002: 17, 2004; Vught et al. 2002: 108; Neave 2003: 149ff; Wächter 2004: 268ff; Walter 2006a: 186ff) national strategies and preferences played an important role when it came to the institutionalization of this policy process and the adoption of goals and objectives (see Hackl 2001; Luijten-Lub et al. 2005; Martens/Wolf 2006). Most authors therefore claim this process to have an intergovernmental character (e.g. Cerych 2002: 123; Zervakis 2004: 113). The key initiative for cooperating goes back to national ministers and senior state officials. The formal decision power rests unanimously with the ministers responsible for higher education and the EC. Still the Bologna Declaration and all following official documents adopted by the ministers is not only a matter of voluntariness without legal effect (Amaral/Magalhães 2004: 84) but also a commitment of the signatory countries to contribute to its success within its organizational framework (Hackl 2001: 27; Zgaga 2003b: 4). Regardless of its (intergovernmental or supranational) character it does not matter what kind of actors decide on the course of the Bologna Process to explain its impact. More important for analysing its national effects are the underlying mechanisms causing national policy change and cross-national policy convergence.

The Bologna Process is mainly inanked to the analysis of soft governance (see Martens et al. 2004; Veiga 2005, Veiga/Amaral 2006, Walkenhorst 2005; Walter 2006a, b; Trondal 2002) providing a common transnational platform for channelled communication and policy coordination between higher education actors. Basically the Process can be described as transnational higher education regime (Walter 2006a, b; Nagel 2006) framing domestic beliefs and expectations (Veiga 2005: 10; see also Knill/Lehmkuhl 2002). This can in turn cause national policy change by changing preferences and strategies of national actors (see Eising 1999; Kohler-Koch 1999). The question remains how does this regime work? How does the Bologna Process explain domestic policy change? What are the causal mechanisms at work leading to policy convergence between the participating countries? To clarify this issue we want to fall back on previous work on cross national policy convergence (see Bennett 1991, Knill 2005; Holzinger et al. 2007). The starting point of our considerations remains the assumption that the Bologna Process and its impact on international policy convergence should essentially be described as a process of transnational communication. The term transnational communication relates to various different, but related mechanisms, including lesson-drawing, emulation, transnational problem-solving, and the promotion of policies by international organizations (Knill 2005: 770; Holzinger/Knill 2005: 782ff). All these mechanisms have in common that their function mainly rests on communication and the exchange of information between national

7 For a different point of view see Tomusk (2004). Also the influence of transnational actors like the EC should not be underestimated (see section 3.4).
8 That does not mean that other factors driving cross-national policy-convergence are not interfering with the Bologna Process (see section five). For an overview of mechanisms of cross-national policy convergence see Bennett (1991), Holzinger/Knill (2005) or Braun/Gilardi (2006).
9 The term transnational in turn refers to communication "beyond the nation-state in which private actors are systematically involved" Risse 2004: 3).
and transnational actors as the determining cause for policy convergence (Ibid.). From our viewpoint all four mechanisms can be identified in the Bologna Process.

3.1 Lesson-Drawing

Lesson-drawing refers to constellations where governments rationally utilize available experience by external actors in order to solve domestic problems. Particularly in situations characterized by a high degree of uncertainty about available policy options and the underlying cause and effect, governments tend to transfer policies from other countries and incorporate them into domestic political programmes (see Friedkin 1993; Simmons/Elkins 2004: 175; Holzinger/Knill 2005: 21). According to Rose, who introduced the concept, lesson-drawing is based on a voluntary process (1991, 1993). The government is modelled as a rational actor who poses the question: "Under what circumstances and to what extent would a programme now in effect elsewhere also work here?" (Rose 1991: 4). The occurrence of a learning effect depends on the similarity between the domestic problem context with the observed one (Rose 1991). The creation of new programmes, however, can take many different forms reaching from hybrids of transferred and domestically developed components to completely new models. Rose also emphasizes that drawing a lesson does not require policy change as it includes both both positive (what is do to?) as well as negative lessons (what is not be done?) (Rose 1993: ix–x); a programme elsewhere may be evaluated negatively or there may be no possibility to transfer it (1991: 22). Therefore, lesson-drawing is not the same as policy convergence (see also Dolowitz/Marsh 1996, 2000).

Rose's concept accounts for several ways of finding appropriate information (Rose 1991: 16ff). For example epistemic communities or international organizations can serve as reference, but governments also tend to align themselves with policies that can be found in precursor states or best cases. In contrast Meseguer Yebra (2003) applied the concept of Bayesian learning to policy learning assuming that governments to not distinguish between different informational sources. Given a certain state of information they rather search for the solution that is expected to yield the best results. As all available information is considered and weighted to the same degree governments will converge in their policy choices. Only if governments differ in their information processing capacities, are not perfectly rational or do not collect all available information divergence may occur. Although the notion of learning in this concept is very similar to Rose's concept of lesson-drawing, Meseguer Yebra's approach is different as governments are expected to converge in their policy choices if they are exposed to the same information.

The concept of lesson-drawing plays a vital part in studies dealing with the impact of the Bologna Process on national higher education policy (see also Martens et al. 2004; Walter 2006a, b; Veiga 2005, Veiga/Amaral 2006). The Process offers different ways of giving national actors policy- specific information and experiences at hand to deal with domestic problems. Basically the creation of a multi-level structure on a European scale with its increasing institutional interlinkage on the international as well as the national level has led to additional and intensified communication and information exchange between the national policy representatives of the participating countries and other transnational actors. Today the Bologna Process presents the most comprehensive network dealing with higher education - at least in the European region. Besides the 45 countries involved over a dozen other organisations are participating. The horizontal flow of information and experiences between a diverse set of international and national actors on a transnational scale is further
supplemented by a vertical flow of communication through symposia, workshop and so-called Bologna-Seminars (Walter 2006a: 172, 2006b: 115). Apart from being a platform for intensive communication exchange, the Bologna Process also strengthens the informational basis for transnational as well as national policy actors by increasing the transparency of and the comparability between different higher education policies. Both result from several sources of information that are provided by the participating actors such as periodic stocktaking reports to be presented for each ministerial conference. Their purpose is to give an overview of the current state of implementation in the signatory countries. Additional publications dealing with certain aspects of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are provided like the official reports on the Bologna seminars (e.g. Lourtie 2001, Zgaga 2003a) or the so-called TREND-Reports released by the EUA (e.g. Reichert/Tauch 2003). Last but not least the development of recommendations and joint objectives within this Process helped to describe recommendations and best solutions for the design of higher education systems - for example the change to tiered degree structures or the introduction and application of the ECTS.

3.2 Transnational problem-solving

The joint development of higher education objectives leads us to another mechanism of transnational communication potentially relevant for understanding the impact of the Bologna Process on cross-national policy convergence: the notion of transnational problem-solving. Although transnational problem-solving assumes processes of rational learning similar to lesson-drawing, convergence is not the result of a bilateral transfer between two countries. Rather, convergence is conceived as the outcome of the joint development of common problem perceptions and solutions to similar domestic problems. This not only entails programmatic tasks but also includes the subsequent adoption of the mutually developed solutions at the domestic level (Holzinger/Knill 2005: 784). Transnational problem-solving typically occurs within transnational elite networks or epistemic communities, i.e. networks of policy experts shared principled and causal beliefs, common standards of accruing and testing new knowledge as well as a common policy enterprise (Haas 1992: 3). In this respect international institutions play an important role in forging and promulgating transnational epistemic communities as they provide the ground for joint problem-solving by clustering resources and serving as a permanent arena of contact and exchange between experts and policy-makers alike (Simmons/Elkins 2004: 10). Likewise Kern shows that international institutions play an important role in accelerating and facilitating cross-national policy transfer constituting important channels for multilateral communication and policy diffusion (2000: 144). Compared to policy exchange based on bilateral and horizontal communication among countries, policy models spread more broadly and quickly if these countries are members of the same international institution.

In a similar vein, the Bologna Process illustrates a networked platform coordinating policy makers, experts and related stakeholders in the field of higher education elaborating on common solutions. Some authors describe the Bologna Process as a transnational agenda-setting process (Martens et al. 2004; Walter 2006a). Stakeholders and epistemic communities operate as advisers in the consultation process, whereas the agreement on objectives and problem-solving strategies takes place unanimously and in an intergovernmental fashion at the ministerial meetings. The most pronounced example for this dimension of the Bologna Process is probably the development of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area by the ENQA. On behalf of the preparatory work by this consortium of experts and specialists on quality assurance, certain guidelines and a common approach for designing national quality assurance have been adopted by the ministers responsible for higher education (ENQA 2005; Hopbach/Serrano-Velarde 2007).
3.3 Emulation

Policy convergence can also be driven by the mere desire for conformity with other countries. Instead of searching effective solutions to given problems i.e. policy transfer is the result of emulating other policies (Bennett 1991: 220ff; DiMaggio/Powell 1991; Simmons/Elkins 2004; Holzinger/Knill 2005: 784f). Emulation usually implies the simple copying of policies adopted elsewhere. In the literature various aspects are mentioned to explain such behaviour. One argument is that emulation is the outcome of so-called herding effects. Instead of using further information on certain policies, countries often rely on the sheer number of followers as an indicator to decide that this might be the best policy to implement (Levi-Faur 2002). Especially in situations characterized by a high degree of uncertainty concerning the effects of certain policy measures and high transaction costs relating to information and time pressure emulation might have comparative advantages against more demanding forms of learning (Bennett 1991: 223; Tews 2002: 180). In theories of population ecology, a different rationale is emphasized: emulation is the result of the socially embedded behaviour of actors (Meyer/Rowan 1977; Baum/Oliver 1992). The most widespread solution to a problem becomes the obvious way of dealing with it whereas other possible solutions are no longer considered. Emulation can also be based on a more psychological rationale, namely the desire of actors ‘not to be left behind’, a mechanism that has been transferred to the behaviour of state actors within the international system (Finnemore 1996; Meyer et al. 1997; Tews 2002). The fear of being left behind might be a result of uncertainty, but might also be a motive in itself. Especially when an innovation is poorly understood and when its consequences are still unclear actors tend to copycat the behaviour of others (DiMaggio/Powell 1991: 69). It is also possible that organizations are striving to increase their social legitimacy by embracing forms and practices that are valued within the broader social and institutional environment (Ibid.: 70). This might also include cases where the actual conclusions are already reached, i.e. the adopters simply try to legitimize their decisions ex post (Bennett 1991: 223).

No matter what kind of the briefly described rationales behind policy emulation are leading to conformity of national actors involved in the Bologna Process, the dynamics of the Bologna Process are at least prone to related arguments. Convergence in higher education may result from adoption of policy templates provided by this transnational regime that homogenizes discourse at the international level (see Martens et al. 2004; Walter 2006a). This in turn creates the conditions for policy emulation or mimetic processes, whereby national actors – driven in part by uncertainty over future developments – may imitate the practices, models, and policies perceived to be legitimate and successful. In this context, it is especially the transition to the knowledge-based economy (Heidenreich 2003), increasingly intense international academic networking (Gornitzka 2005), the sheer burden of responsibilities placed on higher education systems in times of "massification" (Teichler 1996b) and dwindling state funding (Farnham 1999: 6f) that has added an unprecedented component of uncertainty and rendered the response capability of national higher education systems highly problematic.

3.4 International policy promotion

Countries might not only be inspired to adopt a certain policy because of rational learning, transnational enterprises or the desire for conformity. A more hierarchical logic is described by the notion of international policy promotion. According to this argument cross national policy convergence is the result of legitimacy pressures emerging from the promotion of policy models by international institutions and the active role of these institutions promoting the spread of distinctive policy approaches they consider particularly promising (Holzinger/Knill 2005: 785f). Policy transfer between countries can be facilitated and accelerated by non-binding international agreements or propositions on broad goals and standards that national policies should aim to achieve. Further instruments
encompass institutionalized peer reviews and identification of best practice (benchmarking) as well as the construction of rankings evaluating national policies in terms of performance to previously agreed criteria (Humphreys 2002: 54; Tews 2002: 174). Most prominently discussed are the European Union (EU) (Eising 2002), the OECD or the World Bank (Morrissey/Nelson 2003). But even nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and transnational interest organizations (play a highly active role in this process (Keck/Sikkink 1998). International institutions like NGOs function partially as mediators of cross-national policy transfer, pushing national governments to adopt successful policy models (Kern et al. 2000: 10). They search for and promote new policy ideas, disseminate best practice and evaluate domestic policy performance. Countries that deviate from recommended policy models or rank low in international league tables face pressure to legitimize their policy approaches in light of ‘international scrutiny’.

There are a lot of different transnational actors and pressure groups involved in the Bologna Process lobbying for change by "naming, blaming and shaming" Wessels/Linsemann 2002: 4). Overall these organizations create a transnational normative environment of pressure and change that gives policy makers the need for adjustment at hand (Keller 2003: 22). So far it is mainly the European Commission that is in the spotlight of higher education research on the Bologna Process (see e.g. Martens et al. 2004; Neave 2003; Wächter 2004). Although the European Commission lacks the organizational autonomy which it possesses in other policy areas, the supranational character of the Bologna Process already appeared in its agenda and the policy recommendation adopted during the process. Many guidelines like the introduction of diploma supplements or the ECTS-System have been extracted from the already existing European mobility programmes (see Hackl 2001: 26; Cerych 2002: 122; Field 2003: 189; Martens et al. 2004: 8). Also the Commission’s influence on the process itself increased significantly (see Neave 2003: 149; Martens et al. 2004; Wächter 2004: 271; Witte 2006: ch. 5). Since Prague 2001 the EC has become an official member of the process, fully integrated in governing the Bologna Process. Even outside the Bologna Process, the European Union is penetrating into European higher education, in particular by making universities a crucial element of its Lisbon strategy to turn Europe into the “most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Commission 2003a: 1) by 2010 (see also Tomusk 2004: 80; Wächter 2004: 271; Huisman/Wende 2004: 352; Martens et al. 2004: 9). By integrating the Bologna Process into the so-called open Method of Coordination (OMC), a basis for transnational benchmarking and voluntarily agreed guidelines on policies has been provided. Both timetables for achieving these goals as well as periodic monitoring, evaluation and peer review processes allow for the identification of advanced performers (see Martens et al. 2004: 10; Walter 2006a, b). In other words, instead of generating clear-cut legislation, the infrastructure of the Bologna Process has given the Commission an instrument at hand to pinpoint and set joint objectives to be reached by setting common benchmarks (statistics, indicators) and employing comparative tools to stimulate innovation. The possibilities of the EC to promote the Bologna goals are further supplemented by the option to finance corresponding research projects, to maintain Bologna Seminars or to financially support the introduction of ECTS at universities (Martens et al. 2004: 10f).

11 Other cases so far that have been analysed when dealing with the impact of international organisations on higher education are the OECD and the UNESCO (see Martens et al. 2004; Martens/Jakobi 2007).
4 Mapping national conditions of cross-national policy convergence

Having elaborated on the major causes of policy convergence underlying the Bologna Process we still need to identify potential explanatory variables determining its effects on convergence. Basically two groups of causal factors can be distinguished for explaining cross-national policy convergence (see Knill 2005; Holzinger et al. 2007). Next to causal mechanisms like transnational communication conditional factors influencing the impact and effectiveness of these convergence mechanisms have been considered. This encompasses country-specific factors like the institutional, socioeconomic and cultural similarity between countries exposed to convergence pressures, or factors relating to the characteristics of underlying policies (e.g. distributive vs. regulative policy types or different policy dimensions like policy paradigms, policy instruments and settings). As we consider only one causal mechanism, namely transnational communication exemplified by the Bologna Process, our focus here is on the last group of factors - more specifically we consider country-related or national factors.

So far we have only limited understanding of the question what national factors determine the effects of transnational communication. Empirical findings differ according to regions, observed time periods and the degree of policy convergence making it hard to evaluate competing hypothesis (Drezner 2001: 66; see also Heichel et al. 2005; Heichel/Sommerer 2007). Previous work mainly concentrated on comparing different causal mechanisms. But this does not tell us anything about the conditions under which these mechanisms actually lead to convergence (Knill 2005: 765; Holzinger/Knill 2005: 776; Plümper/Schneider 2007: 17). Especially regarding higher education policy a comprehensive and systematic analysis of transnational communication and its effects on policy convergence is still missing (see Heichel et al. 2005; Heichel/Sommerer 2007; Vink/Graziano 2006: 4; Treib 2006: 16). A diverse array of country-specific factors potentially affecting the effectiveness of convergence mechanisms can be found in the literature on Europeanization and on cross-national policy convergence (see Tews 2002; Holzinger/Knill 2005; Treib 2006; Mastenbroek 2005) encompassing both cultural and institutional but also socioeconomic factors. To narrow down our analysis we focus on factors related to outputs of the political system only, i.e. the policies adopted by governments. We do not consider other implementation levels like outcomes as these may be influenced by many intervening variables (Holzinger/Knill 2005: 776). Within the Bologna Process governments act as agents directly involved in the exchange of communication, but policy outcomes are only indirectly related to the causal mechanisms of convergence depending also on apolitical factors.

4.1 Cultural factors

Cultural factors belong to the standard repertoire in political science (e.g. Esping-Andersen 1990; Hajer 1995; Inglehart/Carballo 1997; Simmons/Elkins 2004). Despite a main focus on environmental, economic, and social policy, cultural factors have also been used for analysing higher education systems (e.g. Clark 1983; Zha 2003; Bartell 2003; Vaira 2004). The explanatory power of cultural variables is mainly based on the assumption that cultural orientations are linked to specific patterns of interpretation and perception. Beliefs and expectations frame the behaviour and the interactions of actors taking part in the policy process and policy-making and therefore determine policy outputs themselves. To put it different, policy-specific discourses and political agendas are set within the broader cultural context of each country (Feick/Jann 1988: 210; Lenschow et al. 2005: 801). Almond and Powell define political culture as the "[...] psychological dimension of the political system [...] It

---

12 For a different clustering see Drezner (2001) or Tews (2002)
13 This concerns the Bologna Process as well as other forms of soft governance in Europe like the OMC (Schäfer 2006: 71).
consists of attitudes, beliefs, values, and skills which are current in an entire population, as well as those special propensities and patterns which may be found within separate parts of that population” (1966: 23). So far different cultural dimensions have been discussed in the literature describing cultural characteristics of countries as well as the similarities between these states. This includes factors like geographic proximity, religious structure or the level of secularization (Castles 1994), values (Inglehart 1989) or policy styles characterizing the political process (Richardson 1982; Feick/Jann 1988).

In the literature on policy convergence several studies refer to the significance of cultural similarity in determining the impact and effectiveness of transnational communication (Friedkin 1993; Strang/Meyer 1993; Strang/Soule 1988; Lenschow et al. 2005). First, culturally similar countries are expected to share cognitions and perceptions concerning problems and their solutions (Lenschow et al. 2005: 801) leading to the adoption of similar policies. This corresponds to the idea that countries characterized by a similar political culture will tend to interpret and decode communication and its subjects likewise. Second, one can assume that policy transfer occurs more easily between countries with strong cultural linkages. In their search for relevant policy models, decision-makers are expected to look at the experiences of those countries with which they share an especially close set of cultural ties (Strang/Meyer 1993). Notably in constellations characterized by high uncertainty about the consequences of policy choices, decision-makers are likely to imitate the practices of nations with which they share linguistic, religious, historical or other cultural linkages (Friedkin 1993; Simmons/Elkins 2004: 175).

Studies dealing with the differential impact of European integration on national policies also refer to cultural factors (e.g. Börzel 2005; Börzel/Risse 2003; Falkner et al. 2005; Goetz 2006). A more general assumption is based on the argument that political cultures characterized by a consensual type of policy-making can adapt more frequently to European policies as oppositional political and social forces may be integrated and bound in the implementation process (see Héritier/Knill 2001: 258; Cowles/Risse 2001: 228). In a similar vein, authors dealing with Europeanization come to the conclusion that one can distinguish different families of nations regarding the adaptation and implementation of EU-requirements within the Union (see Sverdrup 2004; Falkner et al. 2005; Goetz 2006). For example one can describe three "worlds of compliance" denoting a "specific national culture of digesting adaption requirements" (Falkner et al. 2005: 319). Such types of countries illustrate relatively stable patterns of how adjustment processes normally take place within the countries.

4.2 Institutional factors

Institutional approaches have a rather long tradition in policy-analysis (see Schmidt 1993, 2003). This popularity is mirrored by a variety of institutionalist approaches to be found in the present literature (see March/Olsen 1989; Steinmo/Thelen 1992; Hall/Taylor 1996). The basic assumption is that institutions - similar to cultural factors - influence actor's behaviour, e.g. by determining the options of action, actors' constellations, forms of interaction as well as political resources available (see Mayntz/Scharpf 1995). But what actually are political institutions? Seibel for example defines political institutions as formal organisation structuring the policy process, i.e. agenda-setting, opinion formation, mode of conflict resolution, formation of consensus, decision-making, and implementation (1997: 363). This may include constitutions and laws, but also constitutional bodies like the government or parliaments, public organisation such as courts or intermediary organisations like parties or pressure groups.

In the literature on policy convergence and Europeanization several studies often refer to the significance of institutional compatibility between transnational concepts and domestic policy legacies
in determining the probability for policy transfer. The degree of expected convergence will decrease with the costs implied by the adoption of a certain policy (Kern et al. 2000; Knill 2001). Especially in cases where the adoption of a certain model requires far-reaching changes in existing institutional arrangements (e.g. regulatory frameworks, administrative structures), there is a high probability for only partial or even refused transfer. The same scenario applies to constellations in which the model in question entails high economic costs or is likely to face strong political opposition. In studies on Europeanization this assumption has mainly been discussed under the term "Goodness of Fit" or "Misfit" (see Duina 1997; Cowles/Risse 2001; Börzel 2005; Börzel/Risse 2003). In contrast to studies on policy convergence the significance of the misfit hypothesis has been highly contested (Haverland 2000; Héritier et al. 2001; Falkner et al. 2005; Mastenbroek/Kaeding 2006; Mastenbroek/Keulen 2006; Treib 2006; Steunenberg 2007). Apart from its poor empirical performance this critique relates mainly to the fact that this variable remains too deterministic and that it lacks actor-centred factors for analysing the differential impact of Europeanization.

Various factors reflect the assumption that Europeanization does not only entail pressure by European institutions and that the European system of multi-level-governance can also be used and exploited by domestic actors to achieve their own goals (see Radaelli 2003: 46). The possibility for taking advantage of European policies depends on the existence of "norm entrepreneurs" (Börzel/Risse 2003; Börzel 2005) or the degree of domestic support for adjusting existing policies (Knill/Lehmkuhl 2002). Recently the programmatic similarity and the policy preferences and beliefs of national governments come to the fore in research dealing with Europeanization and policy transfer (Holzinger/Knill 2007; Treib 2005; Mastenbroek/Keulen 2006). A more comprehensive approach encompassing structural as well as more actor-centred factors is pursued by Tsebelis who systematically analyses the institutional capacities to perform policy change (Tsebelis 1995, 2002; see also Immergut 1990; Haverland 2000; Steunenberg 2007). According to this approach the probability for policy change and policy transfer respectively depends on the existence of veto players, i.e. "individual or collective actors whose agreement is required for the change of the status quo" (Tsebelis 1999: 593). Similar to Seibels definition this may include individual actors like presidents or collective actors like chambers of parliaments or governing parties. The basic assumption underlying this theory is that the probability for policy change decreases with the number of veto players, their ideological and policy-specific differences as well as the cohesion within the (collective) veto players (Tsebelis 1995: 293 ff; 1999: 593 ff; 2000: 464 ff; 2002: 2).

Last but not least, one can assume that policy convergence will be higher among states that share similar policy legacies (e.g. welfare state traditions). Institutionally similar countries should face lower costs of adjustment when borrowing policy models from each other. This means that the impact of convergence mechanisms like transnational communication will have stronger effects among states that are relatively similar in terms of existing institutional structures than among states characterized by highly different arrangements (Holzinger/Knill 2005: 791). Of course, institutional similarities are neither directly leading to policy convergence nor causing convergence. Rather the institutional context at home influences the effectiveness of mechanisms like transnational communication regarding the observable degree of cross-national policy convergence by structuring national decision-making: "Change continues, but it is bounded change" (Pierson 2000: 265). Accordingly, countries characterized by similar institutional configurations should adopt similar (transnational) policy items (see e.g. Lenschow et al. 2005).

### 4.3 Socioeconomic factors

Cross-national policy convergence is not only affected by cultural and institutional factors but can also arise as a result of a country's socioeconomic characteristics. Once again the expectation is that in
case of similar socioeconomic conditions countries are more inclined to react to a problem in a similar way and to transfer the same policy concepts. The national impact of transnational communication is expected to be stronger if the countries under investigation share a broad number of characteristics regarding their socioeconomic structure (Bennett 1991; Rose 1991; Lenschow et al. 2005; Holzinger/Knill 2005). This refers also to the expectation that countries sharing socioeconomic characteristics are facing similar political problems so that the likelihood for a policy transfer between these countries increases (see Lenschow et al. 2005: 802).

But socioeconomic factors do not only relate to structural similarity only. As studies on Europeanization have emphasized countries facing economic and similar policy-specific vulnerability generally adapt to European policies much more easily (see Schmidt 2002: 898). The pressure for adoption and transfer of external models and policies does not only depend on policy-specific problems but may also result from general problems restricting the state’s capacities to solve policy problems. This may, for instance, relate to fiscal and economic restrictions stemming from regulatory competition (see Vogel 1995; Scharpf 1997; Drezner 2001: 57ff), low economic growth or increasing national debts.

5 Towards a research design

After conceptually decoding the Bologna Process and after we have given an overview of national factors accounting for the differential impact of transnational communication, we would like to link these national factors to the Bologna framework so we can draw up a research design. Basically we want to provide testable hypothesis on the relationship between the Bologna Process and country-specific factors determining and the degree of cross-national policy convergence as explanandum. Additionally we like to elaborate on some methodological issues that seem of great importance for carrying out such a research project.

To fully grasp the national impact of the Bologna Process and the convergence effects caused by the underlying mechanisms we need to consider two different types of policy convergence (see Heichel et al. 2005; Heichel/Sommerer 2007; Plümper/Schneider 2007). Firstly, sigma convergence comes closest to the conventional understanding of convergence as the decrease in variation of domestic policies. In its classic form, a decreasing coefficient of variation (also known as dispersion index) coincides with policy convergence. However, the analysis of sigma convergence alone does only partially cover empirical realities as it does not necessarily address whether policy homogenization is synonymous with increasing proximity to a dominant policy model. Thus, delta convergence focuses on the minimization of the distance to an exemplary model, e.g. as promoted by an international organization or forerunner regarded as successful. Empirically, delta and sigma convergence often occur simultaneously. However, different points of departure can have decisive effects on convergent developments, as policies may indeed move in the same direction, but from different points of origin, leading to the persistence of national peculiarities (see Bleiklie 2001: 27 for higher education policy). Or stated differently, countries may grow together (sigma convergence), but not necessarily move towards a common model. With reference to the Bologna Process, delta convergence refers to the adoption of European guidelines that have been elaborated at the Bologna platform, especially concerning degree structures and quality assurance systems (see McKenna et al. 2005) whereas the analysis of sigma convergence shall answer the question if the Bologna Process describes an isomorphic environment and if the Process serves as a platform for transnational communication characterized by a momentum surpassing the officially communicated and codified subjects (see Knill/Dobbins 2005).14

14 The concept of isomorphism has been elaborated by DiMaggio/Powell (1991).
Based on section four we focus on three groups of variables influencing the impact of the Bologna Process: cultural, institutional as well as socioeconomic factors. The developed theories and hypothesis vary according to the effects to be considered (sigma and delta convergence). This is due to the fact that the underlying theoretical expectations on the impact of country-specific variables on the convergence effects of transnational communication differ partially.

Aiming at a research design suitable for analysing at least a middle number of countries and based on consistent theoretical expectations and clearly testable hypothesis we restrict our focus to country-specific factors allowing us to develop ex ante hypothesis on the differential impact of transnational communication.\(^\text{15}\) Therefore quite popular hypotheses like the "Goodness of Fit" have been left out. A reasonable test of the misfit-argument in surveys dealing with a comparatively high number of cases seems impossible as a precise inquiry of the fit between national arrangement and Bologna guidelines requires far-reaching and quite extensive research (see Falkner et al. 2005). In particular as a comprehensive analysis would not have to deal with a policy misfit only but should also include the inquiry of an institutional misfit (see Hansen/Scholl 2002; Börzel/Risse 2003; Börzel 2005). Thus we have to follow the recent argument that the misfit-argument lacks analytical benefits compared to other mediating factors like national preferences (see Mastenbroek/Kaeding 2006; Mastenbroek/Keulen 2006) and refrain from the integration of the misfit-argument into the following framework. Also we are not able to specify our empirical model on the interactions among the country-specific variables as this would go far beyond the scope of this paper and the preliminary theoretical work (see Braun et al. 2007).

\textbf{Figure 2: Analytical framework}

\[\text{Figure 2: Analytical framework}\]

\[^{15}\text{Often studies dealing with Europeanization do not fulfil this requirement (see Treib 2005: 63).}\]
5.1 The impact of country-specific variables on sigma convergence

To answer the question how country-specific factors impact on the harmonization of national policies over time (sigma convergence), we basically focus on the similarity of these factors between the countries affected by the Bologna Process. This refers to the underlying assumption that the national impact of convergence mechanisms like transnational communication is bolstered the more similar countries in terms of culture, institutions, and socioeconomic contexts are (see Holzinger/Knill 2005, 2007; Holzinger et al. 2007; Lenschow et al. 2005).

5.1.1 Cultural similarity

Concerning the effectiveness of transnational communication and its impact on cross-national policy convergence, we expect that countries culturally alike decode the subjects communicated within the Bologna Process in a similar way hence introducing similar reforms (see Neave 2003: 157). Moreover, as the current situation in higher education is characterized by high uncertainty cultural factors should come to the fore of policy analysis (Friedkin 1993; Simmons/Elkins 2004: 175). Most analysts of higher education systems agree that universities are in a period of profound transformation, which is exerting pressures for the reform and change of established national patterns of higher education systems (see e.g. Dill/Sporn 1995; Enders/Fulton 2002). This in turn creates situations of unprecedented uncertainty and a need for national reforms accentuating the relevance of cultural similarities like geographic proximity, a common language or similar historical origins in higher education, i.e. higher education systems rooted in the Humboldt, Napoleonic or Personal Development Model (Simmons/Elkins 2004; and Gellert 1999; Schimank/Winnes 2001 for higher education traditions). Correspondingly we expect the degree of convergence in higher education policies of culturally similar countries participating in the Bologna Process to be higher than in countries sharing fewer cultural linkages.

Hypothesis 1 (cultural similarity)

The greater the cultural similarity between n countries at a point in time t₀, the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath when coming under the influence of the Bologna Process.

5.1.2 Institutional similarity

Most observers attempt to pinpoint institutional factors for explaining various reactions to the Bologna Process in the individual signatory states (e.g. Welsh 2004; Walkenhorst 2005; Witte 2006). The reference to institutional factors underlines the impact of different national points of departure and pursued reform strategies which sustained national peculiarities filtering adjustment pressure and serving to uphold national differences (see Bleiklie 2001: 26). Thus, we assume that concrete policies especially disseminate between countries characterized by a high degree of institutional similarity as national governments of receiver’s countries have a tendency to transfer policies fitting their existing institutional structure (Knill 2001).

Regarding institutional factors influencing the likelihood of policy convergence between states two aspects seem of relevance for explaining the differential impact of the Bologna Process. The first factors relates to the degree of existing policy similarity across countries (see Holzinger/Knill 2005: 790). We assume that countries featuring similar higher education policies at the outset of the Bologna Process become even more similar when under the impact of transnational communication than states that had pursued distinct policies. When considering this argument one has to take into account the possibility of saturation effects resulting from a very high degree of pre-existing policy similarities (Holzinger et al. 2007; Knill 2005; Lenschow et al. 2005; Holzinger/Knill 2007).
Hypothesis 2a (institutional similarity)
The greater the institutional similarity between n countries at a point in time t₀, the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath when coming under the influence of the Bologna Process, except when the degree of institutional similarity in t₀ is already on a very high level.

A second institutional factor does not relate to the pre-existing policy similarity, but focuses on the programmatic level instead, i.e. the similarity of political programmes and policy preferences of national governments. The significance of domestic preferences and beliefs, especially of national governments, for explaining cross-national policy convergence has been highlighted in convergence studies as well as in research on Europeanization (see Holzinger/Knill 2007; Treib 2005; Mastenbroek/Keulen 2006). Also studies dealing with higher education policy and the Bologna Process have referred to the importance of national strategies and preferences (see Hackl 2001; Luijten-Lub et al. 2005; Martens/Wolf 2006). Hence we also expect that the higher education policies of countries participating in the Bologna Process will converge at a higher degree if the programmes and preferences of their national governments are in accordance to each other.

Hypothesis 2b (institutional similarity)
The greater the similarity between the preferences of governments regarding higher education in n countries at a point in time t₀, the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath when coming under the influence of the Bologna Process.

5.1.3 Socioeconomic similarity
Various factors have been considered, why an agreement on adjusting national higher education systems and building an EHEA within the framework of the Bologna Process was possible (see Hackl 2001; Vught et al. 2002: 108; Neave 2003: 149ff; Wächter 2004: 268ff; Walter 2006a: 186ff). Among these several socioeconomic factors have been discussed like the lacking competitiveness of most European higher education systems compared to most Anglo-Saxon universities (Hackl 2001; Wende/Huisman 2003, Huisman/Wende 2004) or the growing importance of higher education regarding a country's general welfare and the transformation towards a knowledge-based economy (see European Commission 2003b; Vught et al. 2002; Heidenreich 2003). In this context the policy models communicated on the Bologna platform have been developed as Europe's response to global pressures (see Wende 2001; Wende/Huisman 2003).

Largely we expect that decision-making in the member states of the Bologna Process regarding higher education conforms the more similar the socioeconomic conditions countries are facing. First of all, socioeconomic similarities refer to policy-specific problems the states are confronted with. Regarding the impact of transnational communication and the Bologna Process this draws on domestic problem pressure in higher education, i.e. brain-drain, low international reputation of national universities, low graduate outputs and low success rates, academic unemployment, or underfunding (see Teichler 1996b; Altbach 1998; Schimank/Stötting 2001; Enders/Fulton 2002). The dissimilar state of higher education systems results in a differing need for reforming higher education, facilitating or impeding policy change and the transfer of (transnational) policy concepts and best practise (see also Witte 2006: 93f). In case of similar degrees of problem pressure between countries we can expect the Bologna Process to cause similar convergence effects.
Hypothesis 3a (socioeconomic similarity)
The more similar problem pressure regarding higher education in n countries at a point in time \( t_o \), the more likely its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath when coming under the influence of the Bologna Process.

Second, the more similar the socioeconomic structures of the signatory countries are, the more likely it is that reforms in higher education will follow an analogous pathway. This fact refers to the expectation that countries sharing socioeconomic characteristics are facing similar political problems so that the likelihood for transferring the same policies increases (see Lenschow et al. 2005: 802). Apart from general structural indicators like the status of economic development (e.g. cross-domestic product) especially knowledge-based factors like human resources and their educational background, the technical infrastructure and the development of high-tech industries or the expenditure on education should be compared (see OECD 1996, UNESCO 2003, World Bank 2002) and deserve closer attention in relation to the impact of the Bologna Process

Hypothesis 3b (socioeconomic similarity)
The more similarity between socioeconomic conditions in n countries at a point in time \( t_o \), the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath when coming under the influence of the Bologna Process.

5.2 The Impact of country-specific variables on delta convergence

What kind of theoretical expectations can we formulate if we are talking about convergence regarding the approximation towards an ideal policy model developed within the Bologna framework (delta convergence)? The analysis of delta convergence does not apply to groups of countries as is the case when analysing sigma convergence. Rather delta convergence deals with the direction of policy convergence towards a concrete model. Because of this altered point of view we have to formulate different hypotheses concerning the role of cultural, institutional and socioeconomic factors.

5.2.1 Culture of Compliance

To formulate expectations about the influence of cultural factors regarding delta convergence we fall back on different families of nations concerning the adaptation and implementation of EU-requirements within the Union (e.g. Sverdrup 2004; Falkner et al. 2005; Goetz 2006). We tie up to the classification of three "Worlds of Compliance" (see Falkner et al. 2005). According to this approach, it is possible to name three cultural patterns of compliance. The "World of Law Observance" is characterized by cultural conventions leading to a complete and swift implementation of European laws and guidelines, regardless of opposing domestic opportunity structures and interest constellations (see Knill/Lehmkuhl 2002). In countries belonging to the "World of Domestic Politics" the adoption to European guidelines remains a function of domestic interest constellation, mainly preferences of national governments and of the most important pressure groups. The third family of nations has been described as "World of Neglect". In contrast to the other cultures of compliance the influence of national actors pushing for the implementation of European policies is the lowest - at least from a cultural point of view. Domestic problems and interests are considered to have higher priority and European norms and rules are only seriously considered if supranational actors like the EC are intervening (e.g. by lurking with infringement procedures). The pattern of compliance is therefore most

\[ \text{One has to keep in mind that the underlying findings are based on the implementation of EU-directives when testing this hypothesis.} \]
pronounced in the "World of Law Observance" whereas the actual results in the other two cultures depend on additional factors. To be correct, one has to expect that the potential for complying to European norms and rules is higher in the "World of Domestic Politics" than in the "World of Neglect" as the former is not characterized by a cardinal disposition against European policies.

**Hypothesis 4 (culture of compliance)**
Countries belonging to the "World of Law Observance" will to a greater degree converge towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process than countries from the "World of Neglect" or the "World of Domestic Politics". Countries belonging to the "World of Domestic Politics" will to a greater degree convergence towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process than countries from the "World of Neglect".

### 5.2.2 Institutional factors

The convergence towards a specific policy model implies a corresponding national policy change. Therefore it seems obvious to consider the role of veto players for explaining the differential impact of the Bologna Process. Veto players themselves neither cause policy change (Tsebelis 2000: 463; 2002: 32) nor policy convergence, but influence the probability for actually implementing the (non-binding) subjects communicated within the framework of the Bologna Process. Veto players are actors that are able to formally influence or block laws or amendments (see Tsebelis 1995, 1999, 2000, 2002). Individual actors might be presidents, at least if they have formal decision-making power. Collective veto players refer to organs and organisations consisting of individuals, but other than individual actors their veto power can only be carried out collectively (e.g. chambers of parliament or governing parties). Also Tsebelis distinguishes between institutional and partisan veto players depending on the source of their veto power.

The probability for a policy change depends on the characteristics of a country's institutional system: the number of veto players, their ideological and policy-specific distances as well as the cohesion within the (collective) veto players (i.e. the internal homogeneity of ideological and policy-specific distances) (Tsebelis 1995: 293 ff; 1999: 593 ff; 2000: 464 ff; 2002: 2). The probability for policy change – and correspondingly policy convergence – decreases with a rising number of veto players, a deepening in ideological and policy-specific distances, as well as a high (or even increasing) cohesion. Crucial for determining the actual number of veto players within Tsebelis' theoretical framework is the so-called absorption rule (Tsebelis 2002: 26ff). As Tsebelis also considers the ideological and policy-specific distances between veto players he does not simply count the number of veto players. Instead he counts two (institutional) veto players as one, if they both may have veto power but this does not affect policy outputs because they share policy preferences. Bicameral systems, for instance, only count as two veto players if there are different majorities in both chambers. Otherwise they present only one veto player in a veto player analysis relying on Tsebelis' framework. The same applies if a president has the same partisan background as one (or both) chambers of parliament. Likewise in cases of coalition governments only the ideological and policy-specific distances have to be considered.

Overall three hypotheses can be formulated about the probability that a country is adjusting its higher education policy to become consistent with Bologna.\(^{17}\) Firstly, we can expect the degree of delta convergence to decrease with the number of veto players.

\(^{17}\) Although it would be worthwhile to also test the veto player approach regarding the internal cohesion of veto players we do not formulate a corresponding hypothesis as the empirical inquiry is very demanding and would certainly go beyond the scope of any research project dealing with more than a few veto players (see Tsebelis 2002: 49).
Hypothesis 5a (veto players)
The smaller the number of veto players in a country at a point in time \( t_0 \), the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

Secondly, apart from the number of veto players we have to consider the distance among the veto players. Usually expert surveys have been applied to locate the ideological positions of parties (see Castles/Mair 1984; Laver/Hunt 1992) but the analysis on actors’ distances also has to cover the partisan position on higher education policy (Tsebelis 2002: ch. 8; Tsebelis/Chang 2004; see also Steunenberg 2007).

Hypothesis 5b (veto players)
The smaller the number of veto players in a country at a point in time \( t_0 \) and the lower their ideological and policy preference distance respectively, the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

Thirdly, we can expect the probability for policy convergence to increase with the duration of governments (see Tsebelis 1999). The underlying assumption is that governments need time for consolidation and that governments will only tackle significant problems after this period of consolidation.\(^\text{18}\)

Hypothesis 5c (veto players)
The longer the government of a country is in office at a point in time \( t_0 \), the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

Apart from analysing veto player constellations, studies on Europeanization stress the importance of preferences and beliefs of national governments for explaining delta convergence (see Holzinger/Knill 2007; Treib 2005; Mastenbroek/Keulen 2006). Presiding from national policy preferences would risk disregarding the case of national actors using Bologna for their purposes (see Hackl 2001; Martens/Wolf 2006). Especially the beginning of the process is associated with the notion of the Bologna Process as being a “window of opportunity” (Kingdon 1984) giving national governments an instrument at hand to circumvent deadlocks and to facilitate national reforms (Martens/Wolf 2006; see also Radaelli 2003: 46; Hix/Goetz 2000: 12ff). Furthermore the significance of national actors like the governments of the signatory states or the responsible departments typifies in concrete actions for implementing the objectives at the national level, e.g. by creating the necessary juridical framework (see Luijten-Lub et al. 2004: 270f). Just like we expect that similar policy specific preferences in the signatory countries are leading to sigma convergence (hypothesis 2b), we suppose a higher degree of delta convergence the more the preference of national governments at the beginning of the Bologna Process match the European policy model.

\(^{18}\) An additional argument of Tsebelis concerns a positive impact of changes of governments on the probability for a policy-change (1999). We believe that this factor has already been taken into account by investigating the policy-specific preferences.
Hypothesis 6 (policy preferences of national governments)
The more the government's preferences of a country regarding higher education policy at a point in time \( t \) match the guidelines defined within the Bologna Process, the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

5.2.3 Socioeconomic conditions
For the analysis of sigma convergence we focused on similarities in socioeconomic structures and problem constellations (hypothesis 3a and b). To answer the question, if and to what degree socioeconomic factors lead to a convergence towards the Bologna subjects we need to consider the degree of problem pressure. As mentioned in section four countries facing economic and similar policy-specific vulnerability generally adapt to European policies more easily (see Schmidt 2002: 898). Thus we can expect an increased domestic problem pressure to trigger policy transfer within the framework of the Bologna Process (see Witte 2006: 93f) - particularly as the Bologna Process describes a platform for disseminating best practices.

Hypothesis 7a (socioeconomic conditions)
The higher the problem pressure in higher education policy in a country at a point in time \( t \), the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

The pressure for adoption and transfer of external models and policies does not only entail specific problems regarding higher education (e.g. the low international competitiveness) but may also result from general problems restricting the state's capacities to solve policy problems. This includes economic and fiscal factors like public debts, cross-domestic product or the financial situation of universities.

Hypothesis 7a (socioeconomic conditions)
The higher the socioeconomic problem pressure in a country at a point in time \( t \), the more likely it is that its higher education policies will converge in the aftermath towards the policy model communicated within the Bologna Process.

5.3 Different methodological approaches on policy convergence
The purpose of this paper is to prepare the grounds for a systematic test of various hypotheses on the differential impact of the Bologna Process in a comparative research design. We believe that we have considered theoretical assumptions suitable to such an approach. Of course the data we need for undertaking such a test is only partially available so far. Data for testing variables like the policy-specific preferences of veto players need original and careful inquiry. Also one has to find appropriate indicators for measuring policy convergence in higher education. Although such questions deserve a high amount of attention by a researcher we do not want to go into detailed discussion of issues like case selection, the operationalization of variables, and methods. Our aim is to provide a kind of construction kit for analysing policy convergence within the context of the Bologna Process (one does not have to test the full range of variables discussed). We do not want to give too rigid recommendations on methodology as the actual setting of a research design is best decided by researchers themselves, in fact within the process of data collection and its analysis. Hence we only deal with a methodological problem we consider to be of great importance to fulfil the task of analysing a higher number of countries. Most authors dealing with a higher number of cases
would recommend employing quantitative methods. At first glance two problems seem to hinder us from fulfilling such a task. Firstly, how to deal with the qualitative nature of most of the needed data? Especially the description of higher education policies (and its convergence) must fall back on qualitative policy indicators (see Harman 1998; Billing 2004; Schwarz-Hahn/Rehburg 2003; Witte 2006). This is quite problematic as qualitative data restricts the number of available statistical methods (see Backhaus et al. 2006). And secondly, do we have enough observations to carry out a statistical analysis (see Stier 1996)? Although the number of countries participating at the Bologna Process increased to 45, this is still a fairly low number of observations - in particular if one wants to test all the variables discussed in section five. And again, should we stick to case studies instead? Of course, conducting case studies for a higher number of countries would seem infeasible. Instead, we believe that two methodological innovations can help us to overcome these two problems: Configurational Comparative Methods (CCM) as well as the Method of Paired Comparison (MPC).

5.3.1 Configurational Comparative Methods

First, instead of working with statistical methods one might draw on "Configurational Comparative Methods" (Rihoux 2006; Rihoux/Ragin 2007). The generic term CCM encompasses macro-qualitative comparative methods like Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA), Multi-Value Qualitative Comparative Analysis (MVQCA) or Fuzzy Set (fsQCA). These approaches are especially designed to analyse up to a middle number of cases as well as variables consisting of qualitative data (see Hermann/Cronqvist 2006; Cronqvist 2003; Rihoux 2006: 686f; Ragin 1987, 2000). Furthermore CCM allows us to overcome the problem of "small N, many variables" (see Lijphart 1971, 1975). This refers to the problem that inquiries in social science are usually facing more competing explanations than observable (or observed) cases exist, consequently preventing the researcher from drawing clear conclusion regarding the supposed causation. As the term CCM already indicates, methodological approaches assigned to this pool of techniques, treat cases as a configuration of a set of conditions and incorporate all observed cases into the analysis. Although such procedures are characterized by the disadvantage that it is not possible to single out the net impact of each variable (except regarding the question if the considered variable is a necessary or sufficient condition for the dependent variable), CCM offers an additional advantage beyond the lower requirements regarding the level of measurement. We do not necessarily have to limit our analysis to some of the variables we proposed in this paper. Nor do we have to incorporate as many countries as possible to render a statistical analysis possible as these methods are qualified for analysing a low number of cases (see Hermann/Cronqvist 2006). The other way round one can consider the disadvantage of not isolating single effects to be a asset as it allows the analysis of complex macro-social phenomena taking into account the interaction between several explanatory factors and identifying alternate explanations for the same outcomes (see Ragin 1987; Pennings 2003; Ragin et al. 2003.

5.3.2 The Method of Paired Comparison

Second, we might try to quantify the raw qualitative data so we can use them for statistical processing. The Method of Paired Comparison (MPC) might serve this purpose very well as it offers several advantages compared to traditional approaches in studies on policy convergence dealing with the

---

19 We do not argue that CCM and MPC are exclusive to each other. Rather it is possible to combine both approaches. Especially regarding the analysis of sigma convergence a dyadic approach like MPC can help to operationalize the degree of sigma convergence so we can employ it in CCM.

20 Of course it is possible to integrate qualitative as well as metrical data in one data analysis through converting metrical values into an ordinal scale.
variation coefficient (see David 1988, Holzinger 2006, Verschuren/Art 2004).

It allows us to use both categorical and metrical data (in contrast to the analysis of the variation coefficient). Furthermore, both types of variables (and various policy dimensions respectively) can be integrated into one quantitative model with the degree of policy convergence as dependent variable. This is different than traditional approaches. Whereas aggregated data only describe complete samples (or subgroups), for instance, by analysing the variation coefficient, MPC relies on information incorporating every country pair. Correspondingly, MPC is less sensitive to outliers as it involves any shift of policy convergence (or divergence) between all pairs of countries. Also, as the unit of analysis is country dyads, it enables us to increase the number of cases available for statistical processing.

To measure sigma policy convergence the original data set on single countries has to be transformed into dyadic data values, i.e. values covering the information on country pairs (Holzinger 2006: 280f). For calculating the overall degree of policy convergence every country pair is only counted once (e.g. double pairs like country A compared with country B and country B compared to A are excluded). One can assign scores to decide if a policy (indicator) is similar for both countries, e.g. a score of 1 equal similarity, whereas a score of 0 is counted in cases of dissimilarity. In cases of metrical data one can apply a normalized metrical score from 0 to 1, based on the differences between the values of two countries resulting in a similarity scale between 1 (item values are identical) and 0 (country pair with the most dissimilar item values). Eventually, we can aggregate the obtained scores (e.g. over the dimensions of a single policy, over all policies, over all countries of the sample or over subgroups). Consequently we get an index of the overall similarity of higher education policy at one point in time.

The procedure for measuring delta convergence is slightly different. Instead of pairing countries and their policies, every country is compared with the proposed policy model, i.e. our point of reference is actually a "virtual country".

6 Conclusion

This paper deals explicitly with the so-called Bologna Process and its impact on cross-national policy convergence. Starting with the assumption that the Bologna Process can be essentially conceptualized as a process of transnational communication, we map various factors affecting the impact of transnational communication on policy convergence. These factors have been drawn on insights from studies dealing with Europeanization and international policy convergence. Based on this discussion we were trying to elaborate on a research design integrating different cultural, institutional, and socioeconomic factors to explain the differential impact of the Bologna Process on cross-national policy convergence. In total we arrive at four hypotheses addressing the varying effects of the Bologna Process on sigma convergence, whereas seven hypotheses deal with delta convergence. In addition we consider two methodological advancements helping us to overcome two problems associated with a more comprehensive analysis of the Bologna Process and cross-national policy convergence: the limited number of observable countries and the genuinely qualitative level of measurement of indicators on convergence in higher education policy.

21 The MPC also reveals some shortcomings. From a methodological perspective the outcome of the analysis is not independent from our sampling (see Holzinger 2006). As this problem generally applies to the analysis of policy-convergence (see Seeliger 1996: 289ff; Holzinger 2006; Plümper/Schneider 2007) one can only try to minimize a selection bias by systematically selecting cases (see Meur/Berg-Schlosser 1994; Ebbinghaus 2005; Seawright/Gerring 2005). Also one has to keep in mind that the increase in cases is mirrored by an unchanged number of subjects. This could lead to an underestimation of standard error in quantitative models. Anyway regardless of its pitfalls the MPC is probably a simple and effective tool for analysing policy-convergence.

22 The number of country pairs increases exponentially with the number of cases \[ N = (n^2 - n)/2 \].
Although European higher education policies and the question of convergence have become broadly discussed topics, the empirical and comparative basis for understanding policy convergence in higher education remains thin and is still restricted in terms of the number of cases examined and the theoretical and methodological underpinning. Most notably systematic comparative research designs are missing. Of course, the lack of systematic comparative analysis in higher education research is mirrored by a rather weak interest of political scientists in higher education policy. Yet this calls for more empirical-analytical studies based on a well-developed theoretical and methodological framework dealing with higher education.

Altogether the purpose of the paper is to serve as a starting point for future research – both as a guide for more comprehensive, systematic and comparative empirical work on higher education, but also for further theoretical and methodological reasoning concerning research on higher education policy. This trend towards greater methodological and theoretical stringency is particularly evident in a number of publications of the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies showing that testing hypotheses can be a fruitful endeavour in higher education analysis (e.g. Theisens 2004; Duzmal 2004; Witte 2006). Still more comprehensive studies, incorporating a wider range of theories, methods, and cases, are missing.

Our way of dealing with the described research questions and the deficits inherent in research on higher education policy is certainly not a miracle cure, in particular because the actual benefits of our conceptual paper have yet to be demonstrated in an empirical analysis. Nevertheless, so far it offers several distinct advantages over most of the previous approaches on higher education policy. First and foremost, we argue that political science theory must be integrated into the object of study in order to test for the most influential variables and better grasp the interaction of explanatory factors. This was exemplified by the incorporation of theoretical explanations from Europeanization and convergence theories and our attempt to illustrate the mechanisms currently at work in European higher education policy: the Bologna Process and transnational communication in the shape of the Bologna Process. Second, it includes both national and international factors to explain policy convergence in higher education. Third, the research design is very specific about its empirical and theoretical scope, i.e. the Bologna Process and national conditions influencing the national impact of transnational communication. Often studies fail to theoretically clarify the causal mechanisms to be examined or mix various convergence mechanisms under the abstract heading of Internationalization, Globalization or Europeanization. After clarifying the research object it is up to every researcher himself if our theoretical considerations can be applied to other research questions. Fourth, to fall back on clearly testable hypotheses and through linking discussions on policy convergence to methodological advancements like MPC and CCM it should be possible to conduct a truly comparative analysis of more than just a few cases. Fifth, and there we move beyond the subject of higher education, neighbouring disciplines might benefit from our consideration as still only poor knowledge if and under what conditions transnational communication leads to cross-national policy convergence is at hand.

Surely a lot of questions regarding the empirical analysis and the research design have been left out. Further tasks encompass questions concerning the integration of control variables. We only considered national conditions affecting the impact of transnational communication, but there are other levels of analysis influencing the effectiveness of transnational communication, e.g. the configuration of transnational communication (see Tews 2002).23 Also we have not touched upon the question of case selection. But if we want to ensure the comparability of the countries we have to elaborate on the

---

23 We only considered one kind of transnational communication, i.e. the Bologna Process. Therefore we could not make any statements on the configuration of the communication flow and its significance for policy-convergence.
criteria we use for sampling. Particularly if we want to generalize our findings and separate the net effects of the Bologna Process case selection is a very crucial subject (see Haverland 2006). Also we have to pay more attention to the issue of methodology. Often authors fail to link the decision for a certain method to the guiding theoretical argument. Although one has to bear in mind several technical arguments when choosing methodological tool kit like statistics, CCM, or case studies, it is essential to make sure that the applied method is able to answer the research questions. In this context, researchers should also note the possibility of successfully combining several methods according to their specific benefits (see e.g. Sprinz/Wolinsky-Nahmias 2004). Hence a lot of very important issues to conduct a research design like the one we touched upon are still open, ranging from sampling to finding appropriate indicators for our variables. And even then, compiling together the needed data is a quite demanding process.

The aim of this paper is simply to provide a kind of construction kit for analysing policy convergence within the context of the Bologna Process. Although we argue for a theoretically and methodologically more comprehensive approach we do not want to badmouth other approaches. It is up to others how to deal with this paper. We do not want to rank certain approaches and methods. We just want to encourage discussions in higher education. As Vught puts it: "[…] it is time that we – in higher education research – do a sort of a next version of Burton Clark's 'Higher Education System', [...] higher education system dynamics [...] identifying the crucial variables and their relationships that explain why higher education systems operate as the do" (Cheps 2005: 4). Perhaps our thoughts can become a part of this endeavour.

7 References


European Commission (2003a): The role of the universities in the Europe of knowledge.


Lijphart, A. (1975): The Comparable-Cases Strategy in Comparative Research, Comparative Political Studies, 8, 2, 158-175.


