Comparing regionalisms within Europe: Balkans, Baltics, Benelux and Nordics in the context of multi-level governance

Mari Elken (mari.elken@nifu.no)
Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU), Oslo, Norway

Martina Vukasovic (martina.vukasovic@ugent.be)
Centre for Higher Education Governance Ghent (CHEGG)
Department of Sociology, Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Ghent University, Belgium

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**Introduction**

European higher education policy arena is an exceptional multi-level governance context (Piattoni, 2010), comprising at least four distinct levels: (1) organizational (higher education institutions, e.g. universities), (2) national (in most cases corresponding to entire higher education systems), (3) regional (within Europe), and (4) European, all of which are also embedded in a ‘world society’ (Meyer, Boli, Thomas, & Ramirez, 1997). Some of these levels can be further expanded depending on the local circumstances, e.g. the organizational level into subunits (universities into faculties), or the national into the federal/state/regional levels. Interaction of actors and ideas takes place across them and can be mutually reinforcing – driving policy and organizational changes in very similar directions; or creating barriers and bottlenecks for change when preferences diverge.

While the interaction between organizational, national and European governance levels has been the focus of many studies (see e.g. Curaj, Scott, Vlaseanu, & Wilson, 2012; or Elken, Gornitzka, Maassen, & Vukasović, 2011 for a review), the regional level\(^1\) has received much less attention. While there are studies which focus on similarities and differences between countries which share cultural, economic and political similarities (e.g. Branković, Kovačević, Maassen, Stensaker, & Vukasovic, 2014; Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2014; Dobbins & Knill, 2009; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2011; Vukasovic & Elken, 2013; Zgaga et al., 2013), a more systematic comparison of the extent of policy coordination and convergence within European regions and the relationship between the regional and European level policy dynamics has been lacking.

With this in mind, the current study focuses in particular on four distinct regions in Europe – Balkans (former Yugoslavia + Albania),\(^2\) Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Benelux (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) and the Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) – and focuses on approaches to and the outcomes of policy coordination within them and in relation to the overarching policy coordination in the Europe of Knowledge. The research questions guiding the analysis are:

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\(^1\) Hereinafter referring to regions within Europe comprising several nation states.

\(^2\) Strictly speaking, Balkans should also include Bulgaria, Greece and Romania, while the region of interest here was sometimes referred to as the ‘Western Balkans’. However, that label has a changing meaning depending on which countries become EU members, so while before July 2013 Croatia was considered as part of ‘Western Balkans’, after that date it no longer is. Thus, in the interest of simplicity, ‘Balkans’ will in this study refer to all countries from former Yugoslavia + Albania. Further rationale for this is provided in the “Context and implications” section of the paper.
1. What are the similarities and differences in how policy coordination in higher education is organized in these four regions?

2. What is the extent of policy convergence within these regions and between these regions and the European level?

3. What is the relationship between how policy coordination is organized and the extent of policy convergence and what are its implications for the overall multi-level policy dynamics within Europe?

The theoretical framework for the study is composed of two elements. Firstly, we draw on literature on policy coordination, by distinguishing different degrees of coordination from no coordination to strategic coordination. Secondly, literature on policy convergence is used to examine the different measures of convergence (distinguishing between convergence of discourse, decisions, practice and outcomes), and distinguishing sigma and delta convergence processes. Methodologically, the paper primarily uses document analysis that has been complemented with interview data.

The article will first outline the theoretical framework, and then present the context and implications – outlining the nature of European coordination and the context of these four regions. This is followed by a case by case analysis of the four regions. The article then provides a cross-case discussion, followed by concluding comments that highlight both empirical and analytical contributions of the study.

**Theoretical framework**

Process of internationalization of governance, policy coordination and integration is neither new nor limited to the European Union. Regardless of whether one subscribes to the neofunctionalist (Börzel & Haas, 2006; Haas, 1958; Stone Sweet, Sandholtz, & Fligstein, 2001) or intergovernmentalist accounts of the process (Hoffmann, 1966; Moravcsik, 1991, 1998), the fact is that, in particular within Europe, there has been increasing policy coordination in many areas. This includes both areas in which EU’s supra-national institutions have specific competences, as well as areas in which the principle of subsidiarity remains formally in place. While in the former coordination and integration proceeds through directives and similar EU-level regulation (the so-called ‘hard-law’), in the latter coordination and integration relies on the setting up of shared objectives and standards (the so-called ‘soft-law’) and employing the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). What has also been evident is that there are a number of sub-regions within Europe that have more or less formalized coordination processes in particular policy sectors (e.g. the Nordic countries have a Nordic Council of Ministers).
Taking this starting point, we examine the relationship between the degree of policy coordination and the extent and type of policy convergence within and between specific regions *within* Europe (see also the third research question above).

**Policy coordination – degrees and implications**

Policy coordination represents the sum of intentional and formal decisions to align policies with another nation state, in this case, within a specific regional context. In some cases, policy coordination also requires existence of specific regional structures with an explicit mandate to organize the coordination.

The level of policy coordination is operationalized using Braun’s Guttman scale of political coordination (2008; see also Peters, 2005). He identifies five distinct possibilities: (1) no coordination, (2) negative coordination, (3) positive coordination, (4) policy integration, and (5) strategic coordination. While Braun developed this scale for cross-sectoral policy coordination, it can also be applied to characterize degrees of cross-national coordination as different countries can be seen as distinct policy systems.

In the context of this paper, no coordination comprises a situation in which the nation states do not invest any effort into coordinating their national knowledge policies. Negative coordination concerns minimizing negative effects policies of one nation state may have on the other in areas of mutual concern, e.g. recognition of qualifications necessary for free movement of labour, and implies in effect a bilateral or multilateral non-cooperative game which results in minimal mutual adjustment (Scharpf, 2000). Positive coordination concerns situations in which actors (in this case nation states) decide to cooperate because they expect that such cooperation will lead to a ‘win-win’ situation for all involved. In such situations, the nation states continue to develop independently their own policies and programmes with their own goals, but also agree to cooperate in the delivery of some services related to these policies, e.g. joint student mobility programmes (Peters, 2005). Policy integration takes coordination one step further and includes development of joint goals so the nation states are no longer completely independent with regards to development of their own policies and programmes. Finally, strategic coordination comprises all of the previous steps, as well as “common visions and strategies for the future” (Braun, 2008, p. 231). This also means that if the intention is to develop common strategies and visions, then administrative capacity to manage such processes is required. Therefore, one can expect that in case of strategic coordination there will also be specific structures with explicit mandates to organize monitor coordination.

The degrees of coordination essentially highlight the process dimension. In all cases, (apart perhaps from the situation of no coordination), there needs to be some communication between the relevant
actors, most limited in the case of negative coordination, and most encompassing in the case of strategic coordination. Moreover, already in the case of negative coordination there needs to be some sharing of knowledge about specific policies and administrative arrangements between the nation states. Therefore, even negative coordination provides opportunities for policy transfer, i.e.

“a process whereby knowledge about policies, administrative arrangement, institutions, ideas and so on are used across time and/or space in the development of policies, institutions, and so on elsewhere” (Bomberg & Peterson, 2000, p. 10). Such opportunities increase with the increase of the degrees of coordination and, arguably, policy transfer is a necessary condition for policy integration or strategic coordination to take place. In turn, policy transfer, even in the situation of negative coordination, may lead to some policy convergence (Knill, 2005; Vukasovic & Elken, 2013).

Convergence – measures, types and factors

Cross-national policy convergence concerns increasing similarity over time of “one or more characteristics of a certain policy (e.g. objectives, policy instruments, policy settings)” (Knill, 2005, p. 5). Holzinger and Knill (2005) make a useful distinction between (a) convergence of policy outputs – increasing similarity of policies adopted by a government, and (b) convergence of policy outcomes – increasing similarity of effects of these policies. However, Pollitt (2002) offers a more nuanced distinction between (1) discursive convergence, (2) decisional convergence (cf. policy outputs convergence), (3) practice convergence, and (4) results convergence (cf. policy outcomes convergence). This distinction is important given that outcomes of policy transfer may remain limited only to ideas and thus lead only to discursive convergence due to complexity of policy implementation which “rarely, if ever take[s] place in a ‘level playing field… More commonly implementers find that they are obliged … to mould their innovations to the cultural, legal or organizational status quo” (Pollitt, 2002, p. 476). Moreover, the distinction complements the process focus of the degrees of coordination (see above), by adding the outcomes dimension.

In the context of multi-level governance, where policy coordination and policy transfer may take place both vertically – between different governance levels (e.g. between European or regional and national levels), but also horizontally – between actors on the same governance level (e.g. between nation states), two types of cross-national policy convergence are possible: (a) vertical (or delta) convergence towards a common model and (b) horizontal (or sigma) convergence which implies convergence of higher education systems or institutions towards each other (Heinze & Knill, 2008). In the context of this study, this effectively leads to four distinct convergence dynamics:

- sigma convergence between countries belonging to the same region, i.e. sigma convergence within Balkans, Baltics, Benelux and Nordics (regional sigma convergence);
- depending on the existence of specific regional (e.g. Nordic) models, delta convergence within the different regions towards said regional model (regional delta convergence);
- sigma convergence between the different regions in Europe (European sigma convergence); and
- delta convergence between the different countries and the European model (European delta convergence).

In each of these cases, sigma or delta convergence, if it indeed takes place, can be limited only to discursive convergence but it can also result in the other three outcomes – decisional, practice and outcomes convergence. This effectively yields a four-by-four matrix of possible results of convergence processes. In the context of this study, this means that it is necessary to explore the existence of each of four dynamics in the four regions under study, the results these dynamics may lead to, in particular focusing on their facilitating and impeding factors of convergence.

When it comes to sigma convergence, cultural and socio-economic factors matters. Heinze and Knill (2008) highlight in particular similarities in terms of linguistics, historical legacies with regards to higher education cultures and policies, political preferences of national governments, problems which the countries may be facing and socio-economic structures, as facilitating factors. On the basis of this, one can expect sigma convergence within the regions to be more prominent than sigma convergence between the regions. However, additional factors may be at play which moderate this expectation. The extent to which policy transfer leads to policy convergence also depends on the motivation of domestic actors to engage in horizontal policy transfer in the first place, e.g. how dissatisfied are they and whether they perceive that a solution from another country will alleviate the domestic problems they identified. Adaptation costs for domestic actors, possibility that some of these actors may not be willing to change the status quo matter in this case as well (Benson & Jordan, 2011). Furthermore, complexity of what is transferred also matters – complex programmes are more difficult to transfer and the process may be mediated by path dependency, institutional and structural obstacles as well as lack of ideological compatibility and insufficient domestic capacity (Dolowitz & Marsh, 1996).

Concerning delta convergence, insights from Europeanization studies are of interest. Europeanization, understood narrowly,3 concerns processes through which national and sub-national entities adapt to pressures coming from the European level (Radaelli, 2003). It is thus pertinent to adaptation between different governance levels (including national and regional) and

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3 See Olsen (2002) for a review of the different uses of the term.
factors which facilitate Europeanization can, therefore, be considered to facilitate delta convergence in general (see Sedelmeier, 2011 for a general discussion; Vukasovic, 2013 for adaptation to the context of higher education). In essence, delta convergence is facilitated by clarity of the regional or European model, its legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of the process leading to this model, clarity and strength of positive consequences of adapting to said model, resonance between the model and the domestic context, identification and participation of domestic actors in regional or European epistemic communities, domestic administrative capacities and prior regionalization or Europeanization of the domestic policy arena. Impeding factors include the adaptation costs for domestic actors, in particular those which are in the position to block changes, as well as strength of domestic institutional legacies. Of importance are also asymmetries between the regional or European and the national level with regards to power and information, facilitating the process when asymmetry is in in favour of the regional/European level, and impeding it if the asymmetry is in favour of the national level (see also Falkner, Hartlapp, & Treib, 2007; Falkner & Treib, 2008; Heinze & Knill, 2008 on compliance cultures). Having in mind the characteristics of the different degrees of coordination (see above), one can expect that delta convergence will be more prominent for higher degrees of coordination.

**Summary**

Thus, in order to explore the importance of regional policy coordination in the overall building of Europe of Knowledge, the study will examine the relationship between the formal degree of policy coordination and the different types and outcomes of policy convergence (Figure 1).
**Research design**

The study is designed as a qualitative one, involving three levels of analysis: (1) national, (2) regional and (3) European. It involves multiple comparisons of policy coordination and convergence across these levels of analysis in order to (a) assess the degree of coordination and (b) identify measures and types of convergence.

The study is primarily based on analysis of policy documents. For assessing the degrees of regional policy coordination, regional treaties, declarations of cooperation or statutes, mission statements, work programmes or policy statements of institutions with a mandate to organize policy coordination (where this exist) have been analysed. For exploring the measures and types of policy convergence, national policy documents (legislation, white papers, etc.) have been the primary source, complemented by various multi-national or European wide reviews of the state-of-the-art (e.g. EACEA, 2012; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). The data base is further complemented by secondary sources, which are in general more available for the Benelux and Nordic regions than for the Balkans and Baltics, but in the latter case interviews with key policy actors were also conducted when relevant.

Analysis of policy convergence is limited to three aspects of higher education policy: (1) quality assurance (QA) and accreditation, (2) cross-national joint degrees and (3) recognition of qualifications. This choice was guided by several considerations. All three issues can be subject to policy coordination. However, while recognition of qualifications and joint degrees by definition concern cross-national dynamics (so they can be considered as most-likely cases of coordination), QA and accreditation do not necessarily require cross-national policy coordination. That said, while QA and accreditation are intrinsically important for different HE systems, they are also issues which are at the core of European initiatives in higher education and are sometimes also part of regional coordination.

A further distinction can be made between joint degree programmes and procedures for recognition of qualifications. While HEIs are not required to establish joint degree programmes and the countries do not necessarily need to develop appropriate legislative framework and other policy instruments to support joint degree programmes, recognition of qualifications is far less voluntary. In essence, the only legally binding document within the Bologna Process – the so-called Lisbon
Recognition Convention\(^4\) – concerns precisely setting up of standards and guidelines for the process of recognition of qualifications. Countries participating in the Bologna Process are required to ratify it, thus making it part of their internal legislative system. In addition, countries can also develop special procedures for specific countries, further facilitating recognition or perhaps introducing automatic recognition of qualifications from specific countries.

In the following section, the degree of policy coordination in the Europe of Knowledge will be discussed, and similarities and differences within and between the four regions presented. This will then serve as the basis to discuss the relationship between degrees of policy coordination in the four regions, the presence of different types (sigma/delta) and measures of policy convergence (discursive/decisional/practice/outcomes), and the relationship between the two.

**Context and implications**

**Degree of coordination in Europe of Knowledge**

Europe of Knowledge presents a particular context for examining the scope of coordination and convergence, relying both on EU-led joint coordination processes, and the transnational-intergovernmental Bologna Process, what have been termed the two pillars of Europe of Knowledge (Maassen & Musselin, 2009).

The idea of a European higher education policy has been traced back to early days of European Community. Already at the Messina meeting in 1955, the establishment of a European University was proposed, so that this university could function as a “model for innovation” (Corbett, 2005, p. 27). While higher education was not included as a community matter, the ‘seeds’ for future action could be found in the Treaty of Rome, i.e. Article 57 for recognition, and other articles covering vocational training (Pépin, 2006). Article 57 outlines the legal basis for developing hard law for recognition:

“In order to make it easier for persons to take up and pursue activities as self-employed persons, the Council shall, on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the Assembly [European Parliament], acting unanimously during the first stage and by a qualified majority thereafter, issue directives for the mutual recognition of diplomas, certificates and other evidence of formal qualifications.” (Treaty of Rome, 1957)

However, agreement on the mode for cooperation in the area of education was not found until the early 1970s, when the platform for common agenda for education was shaped (Corbett, 2005; Pépin, 2006). The discussion had slowly changed from the question of whether there should be educational cooperation to the question of appropriate mechanisms by mid 70s (Corbett, 2005, p. 95). Nevertheless, the Community Action Programme that was established in 1976 met a number of difficulties due to the generally weak legal basis, amongst else resulting also in the rejection of a Communication on admission to higher education (Pépin, 2006). Taking into account that a common educational agenda was established, but this was not really operationalized to joint action or coordination of national policies, this period can best be characterized as negative coordination.

One should also note the dynamics between the EU and the Council of Europe in this period, in particular concerning recognition of qualifications. While the EU initially did not develop hard law to deal with recognition despite the option to do so in the Treaty of Rome, the Council of Europe issued in the period 1953-1990 a number of conventions that would deal with recognition of qualifications and periods of study. 5 These were later compiled and formed the basis for the Lisbon recognition convention in 1997. Furthermore, Council of Europe and UNESCO jointly established the ENIC network in 1994, for joint policy development and recognition. ENIC is the network based on European Cultural Convention, whereas NARIC is a European Commission supported network. These overlap to a large extent: while NARICs are usually also ENICs, not all ENICs are NARICs – and both of them work with recognition and information dissemination. The networks are closely linked, and in 2004 the two networks adopted a Joint ENIC/NARIC Charter of Activities and Services.

The shift towards positive coordination in the EU can be found in the establishment of the Erasmus programme in 1987, often quoted as the flagship initiative of EU coordination in education. Coordination processes that could facilitate free movement of people were seen as necessary for further political and economic integration, with the Gravier decision creating the basis for involvement in (higher) education (Demmelhuber, 2000; Pépin, 2006). While the inclusion of education into the Maastricht Treaty formalized the subsidiarity principle (Pépin, 2006), this period was also marked with contestations and setbacks in terms of developing a more integrated policy.

for higher education (Elken, Maassen, & Olson, 2014). In this period, the aim of creating a more coherent European area for education became crystallized; however, this cooperation was nevertheless limited to specific themes (i.e. mobility), suggesting that this period can be described as positive coordination. However, an implication of this development was that mobility as a policy objective became widely perceived as desirable.

Much changed in the coordination landscape after the introduction of the Bologna Process in 1999, with an aim to construct the European Higher Education Area by 2010. However, the process has expanded over time, both in terms of timeline and scope, and in terms of members. Having initially been signed by 29 ministers of education, it now incorporates 48 countries with a common aim of establishing the European Higher Education Area. The process has been described as a case of ‘unprecedented change in European higher education’, while also being a multi-stakeholder process with certain ambiguities (Huisman, Stensaker, & Kehm, 2009), in essence being a moving target (Neave & Maassen, 2007). Mobility being considered a legitimate policy objective in Europe has also been argued to be the some of the basis for its success (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004). What makes the success particularly unique is its timeline, the lack of budget and lack of consultation with the sector (Neave & Maassen, 2007).

The action lines that form the basic component of the Process expanded during the early stages of the process, and now encompass a number of aspects of higher education. Those that are especially relevant for this study, were included rather early in the process: recognition (through adoption of first and second cycle, 1999), co-operation in quality assurance (1999) and joint degrees (European dimension mentioned in 1999, joint degrees as one operationalization of this action line specified in 2001). The Lisbon Recognition Convention mentioned earlier is one of the few legally binding documents that also have a central role in the Bologna Process, for mutual recognition. In quality assurance, the European Standards and Guidelines for QA (ESG) were adopted in 2005 and revised in 2015. European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) was established in 2008 as a register of European QA agencies that have shown compliance with the ESG.

Overall, after the introduction of the Lisbon Agenda in 2000, the role of EU has also expanded in joint coordination processes for higher education. Having obtained an increased institutional space for policymaking (Gornitzka, 2007), the period after the Lisbon Agenda has been marked with the development of instruments that are indicative of a more strategic coordination. Despite the subsidiarity principle remaining in place, the formal rules have become ‘stretched’ (Elken, 2015), and allow for more coordination. At the same time, there has also been resistance from the member states, and one can therefore argue that while there has been a move towards more strategic coordination in practice, in formal terms the level of coordination are still limited.
Concerning the extent to which these coordination processes have led to policy convergence is ambiguous. Some of the analysis focusing in particular on the Bologna Process suggests that national countries have aimed to develop policies that fit with the overall Bologna agenda (Huisman & Van Der Wende, 2004). However, despite discursive and perhaps also decisional convergence, convergence of practices and outcomes has not been identified (Bieber, 2010; Dobbins & Knill, 2009; EACEA, 2012; Voegtle, Knill, & Dobbins, 2011; Westerheijden et al., 2010; Witte, 2006, 2008). This shows that increased coordination does not necessarily result in more policy convergence and that other elements, apart from the relationship between the national and the European level, should be taken into account. As already indicated, this study wants to explore in particular the role of regional coordination.

**Similarities and differences between the four regions**

The four regions we choose for this study exhibit a complex mix of similarities and differences suitable for exploring policy coordination and policy convergence in a nuanced way. Two of them – Balkans and Baltics – belong to what is sometimes still termed as post-Communist Europe and are in general poorer than the other two regions – Benelux and Nordics – who frequently come on top of various prosperity, human development and democratic stability rankings.

All regions have some common historical legacies. All ‘Balkan’ countries apart from Albania were part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) and all Baltic countries were part of USSR. This is also the case with the countries in the Nordic region which were also at some point in history part of same kingdoms, and similar can be said for different parts of what are now the Benelux countries (e.g. in the early XIX century significant parts of today’s Belgium and the Netherlands were part of the United Kingdom of Netherlands). However, while Benelux is actually also a political and economic union (within the EU), other regions have not (yet) achieved such level of integration.

These differences and similarities between the regions should not be taken to mean that the regions within themselves are homogeneous. E.g. in two of the regions, Balkans and Benelux, there are countries with quite complex governance arrangements. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state composed of two entities and a district with a special status, with one of the entities comprising cantons and the authority concerning HE is distributed in a complex manner between the different governance levels. Belgium is a federation comprising Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels Capital region as federal units and three communities (Flemish, French speaking and German). The main locus of power concerning higher education is situated in federal units. Furthermore, while there are some linguistic similarities within the regions, there are also differences. Albanian is not a Slavic
language (unlike the rest of the Balkans), Estonian is a different language group than Latvian and Lithuanian, and Finnish is not a Scandinavian language (although Swedish is an official language in Finland). Concerning Benelux, the main languages Dutch and French and to a lesser extent German, but the linguistic similarities are fragmented: Dutch for Flanders (Belgium) and Netherlands, French for Wallonia (Belgium) and Luxembourg, and German for Luxembourg and parts of Belgium.

While specific regional models for the public sector do not exist in Balkans, Baltics and Benelux, the shared Nordic welfare state model has been identified as a specific model that encompasses various spheres of the public sector. It has become particularly prominent after World War II, including also shared notions of how education should be organised. However, recent years have also marked increasing debates regarding the perserverance of the Nordic model, especially in the light of changes in the political and social context in the Nordic countries.

The position of the different regions with regards to the EU is also different. Benelux countries are the founding members of the EU, while some of the Balkan and Nordic countries and all of the Baltics became members (much) later. In the Balkan and the Nordic region there are also countries which are not EU members, although the difference should be made between Iceland and Norway which are part of EFTA, and all Balkan countries (apart from Croatia and Slovenia) which are currently vying for EU membership.

Concerning size of HE systems, in most regions except for the Baltics there are big differences in the size of the student populations and number of HEIs (e.g. Montenegro as opposed to Serbia, Luxembourg as opposed to the Netherlands and Iceland as opposed to Sweden). However, all countries participate in the Bologna Process as of 2003 and take part in EU cooperation programmes, according to their status in relation to the EU.

**The four cases**

**Balkans**

*Degree of policy coordination*

As indicated already, the countries belonging to the Balkans were part of the SFRY, with the sole exception of Albania. However, due to dissolution of SFRY which also involved armed conflict and war fought in almost all of its former parts, policy coordination in any area, including higher education, has been a contentious issue and is very weakly (if at all) supported from within the region.
What is relevant, however, that various international organizations are pushing for more cooperation in the region and that all of the countries have a clear orientation towards the EU (with two of them being already full members). Previously, regional cooperation has been supported through the so-called Stability Pact for SEE, which from 2008 onwards has been transformed into a Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). RCC is located in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and has a Board and a Secretariat. What is interesting that participation in RCC is actually not limited only to the Balkan countries but that other countries as well as other international organizations are participants (many of them funding the cooperation). However, the mandate of the RCC is focused on Balkans alone, promoting cooperation in various areas, including economy and social development, energy and infrastructure, justice and home affairs, security, building human capital. It also serves to streamline international donor assistance into the region.

Concerning coordination in higher education, RCC has recently adopted its SEE\textsuperscript{7} 2020 strategy, mirroring the EU 2020, and one of the five pillars concerns smart growth and the focus on education and innovation. This includes also an explicit focus on ensuring increasing in higher education attainment. In addition to this, RCC has supported the so-called Novi Sad Initiative,\textsuperscript{8} within which regional events focusing on cooperation in higher education have been organized since 2005. These events focused on common challenges of higher education reforms as well as implications of the Bologna Process for the countries in the region. Despite attempts to strengthen coordination in this area, the Novi Sad initiative seems to have lost its momentum, possibly because due to lack of funding, as many of the events were funded as side activities of TEMPUS projects.

The existence of RCC and the strategic focus on education (however ambiguous) is indicative of a shift towards strategic coordination. However, one has to have in mind (1) that policy coordination is supported or, arguably, imposed, from outside of the region, (2) that the shift towards strategic coordination has been developed relatively recently, and (3) that it has not been preceded by lower degrees of coordination on a region-wide scale. This makes the shift towards a strategic coordination rather symbolic.

If there is more concrete coordination, it is limited to bilateral relations and comprises negative coordination on very specific issues, e.g. concerning removing obstacles for recognition of qualifications between part of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska) and Serbia.

\textsuperscript{6} [http://www.rcc.int](http://www.rcc.int) (page accessed 14 August 2015).

\textsuperscript{7} Stands for ‘South East Europe’, a term often used to refer to the same region.

\textsuperscript{8} [http://www.nsinitiative.uns.ac.rs/](http://www.nsinitiative.uns.ac.rs/) (page accessed 14 August 2015).
Policy convergence

QA and accreditation. While all Balkan countries have set up their QA systems (including establishing a QA agency or a similar structure), the extent to which these systems operate in line with the ESG is quite varied. In some cases (e.g. Croatia and Serbia) there is a well-developed external QA system, but even there are problems with student involvement (e.g. Serbian QA agency does not include students). Furthermore, there are difficulties with regards to international participation in QA, which is most likely due to more general political reasons and perhaps also lack of funding, given that in most of the region the linguistic similarities are quite prominent. Four countries have agencies registered in EQAR (Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia and Slovenia), suggesting that these agencies operate in line with the ESG. The same agencies are also members of ENQA. However, all countries are committed to building their QA systems in line with the ESG, so one could argue that with regards to QA there is discursive European delta convergence, shifting towards decisional.

Furthermore, there are indications that in some countries specific approaches to QA which go beyond the ESG were developed based on experience from other European countries (see e.g. Vukasovic, 2014). However, it is not clear to what extent these experiences were actually used for developing policy instruments, implying that European sigma convergence is likely to be limited only to ideas and discourses (i.e. discursive convergence).

Some similarities can be identified when comparing different QA systems (e.g. criteria and procedures for programme accreditation in Croatia and Serbia), and while this may indicate presence of regional sigma convergence dynamics, it should be noted that (a) such convergence is piecemeal (i.e. limited to few countries) and (b) more a result similar European pressures meeting similar historical legacies than deliberate policy transfer.

Joint degrees. While most of the countries allow in their legislation the existence of joint degrees, there are actually very few joint degrees awarded (varying from no to 2.5-5% of HEIs, depending on the country). More HEIs participate in joint degree programmes, but these are not necessarily cross-border programmes. E.g. this percentage is quite high in Croatia (51-75%), but one should take into account that most of these programmes are organized by different HEIs within Croatia (primarily a combination of university and non-university).

Concerning participation in specific Erasmus Mundus joint degree programmes, Balkan HEIs are participating as partners (not coordinating institutions) in few of them and in most cases these programmes do not lead to joint degrees (but to double degrees). However, many HEIs indicate
prominently on their websites the willingness to take a more active part in such European programmes, indicating that European delta convergence is limited to discourse.

**Recognition of qualifications.** All countries apart from Kosovo have ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Kosovo, at present, cannot do that because, due to its statehood being disputed by Serbia as well as some EU members (Slovakia and Spain), it cannot become a signatory to the European Cultural Convention which is a necessary condition for being a signatory of the LRC. However, although ratification means that the LRC is transposed into the domestic law (suggesting decisional convergence), the implementation of the different principles of the LRC varies, with Macedonia and Montenegro having implemented only one of the principles adequately. This means that European delta convergence is limited to adoption of policy instruments (i.e. decisional).

LRC does not define which bodies should make decisions concerning recognition and in that respect there is significant variance in the Balkans. In Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia and Slovenia HEIs make the decisions (based on information provided by ENIC/NARIC centres), in Albania and Macedonia this is done by HEIs and the central government, in Kosovo there is a separate national structure involved in this, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are different approaches depending on which part of the country one is focusing on.

It should be noted that there are also bilateral agreements effectively ensuring automatic recognition of qualifications between (parts of) countries (e.g. between Serbia and Republika Srpska, part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), while at the same time there are instances in which one country does not recognise the degrees of another one (e.g. Serbia does not recognise Kosovo degrees). And while some countries have expressed their commitment to facilitate recognition of qualifications within the region as a whole, up until now no specific instruments have been put in place.

Summary of measures and types of identified convergence for the three policy issues are summarized below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Balkans</th>
<th>Discursive</th>
<th>Decisional</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional sigma</td>
<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional delta</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European sigma</td>
<td>QA and accreditation</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>European delta</td>
<td>QA and accreditation (decisional for 4 out 8 countries)</td>
<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joint degrees</td>
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</table>
Baltics

Degree of coordination

Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers are the two main overall regional political coordination structures. The Baltic Assembly as an arena for cooperation between the Parliaments was established shortly after declarations of independence in November 1991 and the initial activities were primarily focused on foreign policy in the form of “return to international arena”, as this is where it was perceived as most relevant. In the early years that followed, education was also formulated as one of the areas for cooperation. In fact, the first agreement on cooperation in education was signed already in 1990, before formal independence.

However, the countries also faced a number of basic issues of transition countries, establishing new state structure (elections, currency, economy, land ownership, etc.). During these initial years, the Nordic model for cooperation was stated as inspirational, and already in 1992, a cooperation agreement with the Nordic Council was established. In 1994, the Baltic Council of Ministers was established, as a result of the Treaty on Cooperation among the Governments and Parliaments of Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The Baltic Council of Ministers composes of prime ministers. The Baltic Council of Ministers and Baltic Assembly have an annual joint session, the Baltic Council. These meetings include progress updates on cooperation and setting the agenda for further cooperation.

Education, Science and Culture Committee is one of the six committees of the Assembly. The first session was already held in January of 1992, where recommendations were issued for joint activities in developing education, culture and science. The initial document was rather ambitious. The aim of these processes was to join Europe (ref ‘return to Europe’): “these states' real possibilities for rejoining the European community depend on a joint solution to these problems.” The document did not only propose joint action, it proposed: “the creation of legal basis for unifying the higher educational systems and the conferring of academic degree”. While the long-term aim was to become a part of Europe, the path to achieve this was through regional coordination. One could argue that this formulation was also rather strong, and indicative of strategic coordination. However, this was not translated into specific activities and it is likely the

9 http://baltasam.org/en/history/
formulation can also be seen in the context of uncertainty. Gradually the arrangement was reduced to positive coordination at that time.

Additional coordination structures have been created since. While there is formal regional parliamentary cooperation structure in the form of Baltic Assembly and Council of Ministers, additional coordination in higher education has taken place in parallel to these structures. The Baltic Higher Education Co-ordination Committee (BHECC) was established in 1994 as a follow-up to collaboration in the area of quality assurance. BHECC implied coordination across multiple lines, including members of Rectors’ conferences, staff of ministries and leaders of national ENIC-NARIC centres.

After this and until 2001, the formal policy coordination outputs from the Baltic Assembly were primarily focused on culture, identity and information. In 2001, the common Baltic education area (CBEA) was launched and quality of education became one of the focus areas for that year. The framing of this was twofold – priority of the sector domestically, and its role as an “instrument for integration into EU structures”. Three points were outlined – student support, loan system and a public transport discount for pupils and students. In 2007 during the 26th Session, the “Resolution on a uniform higher education policy in the Baltic States”11 was issued. The document now again brought increased cooperation on the table, in particular for QA:

“harmonizing normative acts and by creating common or competing institutions with equal legal power for assessing the quality of higher education”.

This formulation suggests again a higher level of coordination, and can be seen as a manifestation of not only joint policies, but have elements of strategic coordination with respect to outlining visions for the future. The document also outlined coordination in terms of using EU funds, and in terms of location of study programmes. Furthermore, it suggested the creation of “uniform system for conferring academic degrees”.

In 2004, cooperation with Nordic countries was formalized in the area of quality of education, as a means to assure the fulfilment of the goals set in the Lisbon in 2000. However, the document appears rather vague with recommendations to pay attention and increase particular outputs, with no specific targets. Currently, the Committee cooperates with the Nordic Council and Benelux Interparliamentary Consultative Council (so-called Benelux Parliament), suggesting cooperation between the three macro-regions in this study.

Policy convergence

Quality assurance. Already in 1994 the first agreement on Baltic cooperation in the area of QA was signed. Overall, regional links in quality assurance appear to be developed and BHCC has played a major role in this early in the process (NCM, 1999), even if a specific regional model which would lead to regional delta convergence does not seem to exist. At the same time, the historically close cooperation and similar challenges have created a basis for sigma convergence on regional level. However, the scope of such convergence is somewhat more ambivalent. There appears to be a very strong discursive convergence as QA is an established area for cooperation, and there is some practice convergence in terms of the approaches. However, the legal status and organisation of the agencies differs. Currently, Baltic QA agencies cooperate across the Baltics, but also with the Nordic QA agencies Network (NOQA). This also suggests a level of inter-regional cooperation.

With respect to the European initiatives (relevant for estimating European delta convergence), EKKA – Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency became a member of EQAR in 2013, SKVC-Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) became a member in 2012. Latvian QA agency is not a part of EQAR at this point, nor does national steering encourage membership in ENQA or EQAR. This suggests variation in terms of European delta convergence. Furthermore, there is substantial variation when it comes to the option to be evaluated by foreign QA agencies – in Latvia at this point institutions cannot yet be evaluated by a EQAR registered foreign QA agency, whereas this is possible in some occasions to be evaluated by external QA agencies in Estonia and Lithuania. This suggests that while there has been high level of decisional convergence from the early developments in the 1990s, there has been more ambiguity in terms of practice.

Joint degrees. Historically, joint curriculum development was conducted through TEMPUS initiatives. However, establishing joint degrees has been complicated, i.e. close curricular cooperation in Baltic and Nordic countries has not formalized joint degrees due to various legal difficulties. Thus, even though Baltic HEIs participate in a few Erasmus Mundus joint programmes both as coordinators and partners institutions, less than 2.5% of HEIs offer joint degrees.

Currently, one of the four aims for 2015 for the Education Science and Culture Committee of the Baltic Assembly is the development of joint degrees, suggesting increasing initiatives on the regional level but also persistent difficulties this far (e.g. specific semester requirements in Lithuania which prevent establishment of joint programmes and degrees). For instance, a study highlighted in that in Lithuania there are specific semester requirements that create barriers. Thus, despite the fact that there are even financial incentives to establish joint programmes (e.g. Lithuania), convergence is limited to discursive regional sigma and discursive European delta.
Recognition of qualifications. LRC was ratified in all three countries very quickly after its inauguration in 1997. This, as well as a follow-up to the Bologna Process, led the Baltic countries to sign in February 2000 an agreement on recognition of degrees in the Baltic region. The document was supposed to complement to LRC, however, the basic principles largely repeat the LRC, with the addition of the frame for recognition of old Soviet qualifications. At present, LRC is fully embedded in national legislation in Estonia and Lithuania, while in Latvia, 4 of the principles were included (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). While possibilities for automatic recognition within Baltics were explored between 2012 and 2015, an explicit agreement on automatic recognition has not been reached, though it is questionable whether it is necessary, given that full cross-country recognition exists already in practice.

Baltic ENIC-NARIC centres have a rather close cooperation, including joint regional capacity development in the area of recognition. There are differences with regards to which institutions and in what capacity are involved in reaching recognition decisions. In Estonia and Latvia ENIC-NARICs have an advisory function, and academic recognition decisions\(^\text{12}\) are taken by HEIs. In Lithuania, the decision on recognition is nominally taken by ENIC-NARIC centre. There have been debates in Latvia to give ENIC NARIC centre the capacity to decide about recognition, however, for the time being, it is the HEI who make the decision.

An interesting aspect of recognition in the Baltics concerns structures responsible for QA and recognition. While in Latvia there is no institutionalised co-operation, in Estonia they are part of the same umbrella organisation (Archimedes) but individual units, and in Lithuania the QA agency (SKVC) also acts as the ENIC-NARIC centre. This is indicative of the lack of decisional convergence, even if there is a level of practice convergence.

\(^{12}\) De facto professional recognition is taken by employers, for regulated professions, (de jure) this is done by a competent body.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Baltic(s)</th>
<th>Discursive</th>
<th>Decisional</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional sigma</td>
<td>Joint degrees</td>
<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>QA (with a shift towards practice)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional delta</td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>European sigma</td>
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<tr>
<td>European delta</td>
<td>Joint degrees</td>
<td>QA</td>
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<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Benelux**

**Degree of policy coordination**

As was previously indicated, Benelux is a political and economic union.\(^{13}\) It was established as a customs union already in 1944, almost full seven years before the EU’s predecessor – the European Coal and Steel Community – was founded. The union has (1) an executive branch which includes the Council of Ministers, an Advisory Council and the Secretariat, (2) a judicial branch (Court of Justice) as well as (3) what resembles a legislative branch but has a more advisory function (Interparliamentary Consultative Council). The composition of the Council of Ministers and the Advisory Council (comprised of high ranking civil servants) depends on the issue on the agenda. The Council can adopt four types of documents (from least to most binding): decisions, conventions, recommendations and directives.

In relation to the EU, the Benelux Union is considered and presented as a frontrunner. Moreover, EU initiatives, in particular their implications for the Benelux countries are often discussed first within the Benelux Union, to ensure that a common agenda and strategy can be employed by the three countries towards the EU, as a way of ensuring influence.

For much of the time since its foundation, economic cooperation was the basis of the union, but the renewal of the treaty signed in 2008 expanded the cooperation to three priority areas – (1) internal market and economic union, (2) sustainability and (3) internal affairs and justice – and the name was changed to ‘Benelux Union’. Knowledge economy is indeed one of focal topics, but primarily

\(^{13}\) [http://www.benelux.int/fr](http://www.benelux.int/fr) (page accessed 14 August 2015).
in terms of the importance of knowledge in relation to the three priority areas. In the area of higher education research there is only one overarching document adopted – a May 2015 decision concerning automatic recognition of qualifications (see below).

Thus, although it is a political and economic union (indicative of an overall strategic coordination), policy coordination in the area of higher education is far less developed and can best be placed somewhere between negative and positive coordination.

Policy convergence

*QA and accreditation.* QA and accreditation systems in Benelux operate very much in line with the ESG, although exceptions from full compliance with the ESG can be identified (e.g. students are involved in all aspects of QA only in Wallonia, and not all countries allow for international participation in QA). However, where they exist, national QA agencies are registered in EQAR (indicating compliance with the ESG). The exception is Luxembourg which does not have a QA agency of its own but its overall approach to QA is deemed as fitting the ESG. The situation is also very diverse when it comes to allowing HEIs to be evaluated by non-national QA agencies that are members of EQAR (from Luxembourg being most closed and Flanders being most open). This means that when it comes to European delta convergence, decisional convergence (related to adopted policy instruments) can be identified.

However, it should be stressed that Flanders and the Netherlands have a common QA agency since 2002, which implies convergence of practices between these two HE systems. NVAO is the only cross-national accreditation agency, whose exceptionality is increased by the fact that it does not operate in two countries, but rather in a country and a federal unit of another country. The development of NVAO is the result of long cooperation between Dutch and Flemish academics in peer review in HE. Thus, regional sigma convergence can be identified, and while it is quite developed (i.e. it is practice convergence), it is limited only to one part of the Benelux marked with linguistic similarity.

With regards to European sigma convergence, although one would expect that some cooperation may exist between France and Wallonia due to linguistic similarity, the evidence suggests that this is quite limited, possibly only in relation to participation of scholars from France in evaluations in Wallonia. However, this does not constitute sigma convergence between France and Wallonia.

*Joint degrees.* The situation with regards to joint degrees is quite diverse in Benelux. While more than 10% of HEIs also award joint degrees in Wallonia, in the other part of Belgium less than 5% do so, and the percentage in the Netherlands seems even lower. The situation is somewhat different
when it comes to participation in joint programmes (which may also lead to double degrees), where Luxembourg, due to the small size of its system, is in the lead, followed by the Netherlands where between \(\frac{1}{4}\) and \(\frac{1}{2}\) of the institutions are part of the joint programmes. The difference between the two situations is related to the fact that joint degrees need to be formally recognized as such (and are thus more difficult to implement). Given above and having in mind that awarding joint degrees is legally possible in all Benelux countries, it means there is regional sigma convergence with regards to decisions, but not practice.

The case of Wallonia is here interesting in relation to European sigma convergence given that some Walloon HEIs have joint programmes leading to joint degrees with French HEIs.

Concerning participation in European supported joint programmes (previously Erasmus Mundus), HEIs from Belgium and the Netherlands have been quite active, coordinating more than 30 such programmes, and participating as partners in many more. Luxembourg is lagging behind, but this is primarily due to the fact that it is a small system and a rather young one at that. However, for similar reasons as indicated above, not all of these joint programmes lead to joint degrees. Therefore, also in relation to European delta convergence, it is limited to decisional convergence in the Netherlands and Belgium.

**Recognition of qualifications.** All three countries have ratified the LRC; Luxembourg already in 2000, while Belgium and the Netherlands did it at the end of 2000s. However, although Belgium was the last one to ratify it, it came furthest in relation to embedding all important principles of the LRC in its national legislation, while the Netherlands and even more so Luxembourg have still some way to go. The LRC does not define which institutions are expected to decide on recognition issues, and the practices are quite different in the three countries under study: HEIs in Flanders (Belgium), HEIs in cooperation with ENIC-NARIC in the Netherlands and Luxembourg and a combination of HEIs, ENIC-NARIC and central government in Wallonia (Belgium). This indicates that there is at best European delta convergence with regards to decisions (adoption of policy instruments).

Significant changes have been made concerning automatic recognition of qualifications. First Flanders and the Netherlands agreed on mutual recognition of their qualifications by amending the NVAO Treaty (see above), and then pushed other parts of Benelux (Wallonia and Luxembourg) to work on automatic recognition. As was indicated above, in May 2015 the Benelux Council of Ministers adopted the decision on automatic recognition of qualifications awarded in Benelux, which refers to the basic principles of the LRC and adds two important conditions: that the qualifications are awarded by officially recognized HEIs and their quality is ensured in a process that is in line with the ESG. Thus, regional sigma convergence with regards to adoption of specific
policy instruments (i.e. decisional convergence), is the current situation, with a recent shift towards practice convergence (given the recent automatic recognition decision).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benelux</th>
<th>Discursive</th>
<th>Decisional</th>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regional sigma</td>
<td></td>
<td>Joint degrees (BE and NL)</td>
<td>QA and accreditation (for NL and FL only)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>(recent shift towards practice)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional delta</td>
<td></td>
<td>Not applicable</td>
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<tr>
<td>European sigma</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Joint degrees (between Wallonia and France)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European delta</td>
<td></td>
<td>QA and accreditation</td>
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<td>Recognition of qualifications</td>
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<td>(extent varies across countries)</td>
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**Nordics**

**Degree of policy coordination**

Much of the formalized political cooperation in the Nordic region was established in the 1950s and 1970s. Inter-parliamentary cooperation takes place through the Nordic Council that was established in 1952. Free trade agreements were signed already in the 1950s. While the 1960s were marked by various not so successful negotiations in terms of appropriate scope for coordination, in 1971 the Nordic Council of Ministers was established to facilitate intergovernmental cooperation.

These developments have established that citizens of other Nordic countries in general have the same social rights as local citizens and there has been an open employment market since the 1950s. The Nordic cooperation agreement from March 1971 was the first main document for establishing cooperation in culture, education and research (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988). The agreement established a common secretariat and budget. However, current cooperation initiatives can for the most part be traced back to the Action plan for Nordic cultural cooperation from 1988 that had an aim to create a “**tighter Nordic education community on all levels of education**” (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988). What this document highlighted was that the formal coordination agreements only represent a small measure of actual cooperation efforts; even without this formal coordination, there
are a multitude of bilateral agreements, joint action initiatives, institutional initiatives, and various kinds of informal cooperation. The action plan established the Nordplus programme that largely substituted EU's Erasmus Programme in the Nordic countries, as most of these countries were not eligible for Erasmus funding at the time. In 1991, a Cooperation Programme in Higher Education was adopted in the Nordic countries (Nyborg, 1996) and work on establishing an integrated higher education community continued.

The Nordic Council discusses a variety of issues and has session once a year. It has 80 members from the various Nordic countries. The Nordic Council Culture and Education Committee is part of it and its main task is to develop political initiatives in relevant areas. The Nordic Council of Ministers is composed on various councils, one being the Nordic Council of Ministers for Education and Research (MR-U). In addition, there is the Committee of Senior Officials and a multitude of different working groups, committees, cooperation bodies and so forth, in total about 20 official Nordic institutions have been developed over time. The structures are highly institutionalized, with a rather substantial secretariat and staff. There are also a number of formalised cooperation agreements in education, with respect to admission, recognition, regulated professions and cooperation on other levels of education. For instance the agreement on admission was established already in 1996, well before the debates in the Bologna Process. Furthermore, formalised cooperation/network structures on regional level exist for quality assurance agencies (NOQA) and ENIC-NARIC centres (NORRIC).

In 2015, the Nordic Council has put education and the Nordic model to focus, calling the Council of Ministers to come with propositions about how a strengthened Nordic educational cooperation could be realised. The Committee suggested in 2013 session the development of common, durable and long-term objectives for coordination amongst the Nordic countries, as one means for strengthened Nordic educational cooperation.

One could argue that these coordination efforts suggest positive coordination but also elements of strategic coordination by setting common targets. However, recent studies have also indicated that there seems to be a rather high degree of symbolism in these coordination initiatives—while they are considered important they are also taken for granted and on occasion not prioritized nationally as other matters with strategic importance take precedence (Elken, Hovdhaugen, & Wiers-Jenssen, 2014). Nevertheless, this high degree of taken-for-grantedness and legitimacy also shows the level of institutionalisation of this cooperation, and that there are areas where elements of policy integration can be found,
Policy convergence

Quality assurance and accreditation. The Nordic QA agencies cooperate through Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA). NOQA in its basic form was formed already in 1992 and later formalized as a network of QA agencies in 2003. Its aim is to create joint understanding in the region. Since 2003, there have been 10 joint projects in the region, regarding external QA practices, learning outcomes, evaluation procedures and recognition, student and stakeholder involvement and adherence to European guidelines. Furthermore, NOQA has in 2014 proposed staff exchange programmes amongst staff for further collaboration, in addition to peer learning and capacity building mechanisms. The network meets annually to discuss various issues, in addition to the joint projects and programmes. However, the basic legislative framework for the agencies differs, and their authorisation from the state varies. This suggests that despite a very high degree of coordination between the units, convergence has been somewhat limited. This is also in line with the arguments that the Nordic countries, despite the Nordic model have in recent years going in diverging pathways in terms of policy development for higher education (Christensen, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2014; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014). At the same time, it is highlighted at a NOQA seminar that the agencies in the Nordic countries (and also Nordic and Baltic region) share principal understanding of how to apply peer review, project leadership, internal quality culture development and the manner in which processes and methods are developed. This suggests that even if there has not been convergence of the structure and formal set up of the agencies themselves (what could be seen as a part of decisional convergence) and in terms of their relationship to the state, there is some practice convergence in terms of how QA is conducted. However, differences remain in the areas of student involvement and employer involvement, to name a few.

When it comes to convergence with European initiatives, Denmark, Finland and Norway have their quality assurance agencies as part of EQAR, while this is not the case with Iceland and Sweden. In Iceland, national legislation also does not encourage participation at ENQA or EQAR. The Nordic countries are also not very open for foreign QA agencies, with the exception of Denmark. In Norway, Iceland and Sweden there is not even a substantial debate on this issue. At the same time, with respect to the development of the external QA system and convergence towards a European model, in 2013/2014 Finland, Norway and Denmark show that the agencies represent a full match against Bologna priorities. In Sweden and Iceland, the QA system only covers a subset of the main issues and is therefore considered to diverge from the European model.
Joint degrees are of high priority in all of the Nordic countries. Nordic Masters\textsuperscript{14} is a specific Nordic initiative for joint study programmes in the Nordic region. It is a rather new initiative, where pilot projects were introduced in the period of 2007-2014, and 23 programmes were funded in the period.\textsuperscript{15} Early in the process barriers with respect to quality assurance, study credits and content (Vabø, Brandt, & Aamodt, 2012) were identified. The programmes require cooperation by at least three Nordic institutions and CIMO\textsuperscript{16} in Finland is evaluating the proposals. From 2015, the programme is permanent. This would suggest that unlike the other cases, this allows an identification of a specific model on Nordic level, allowing for delta convergence in the region.

With respect to Erasmus Mundus, the Nordic countries have also been comparatively active. In the 2012 round of decisions, the region had in total 14 EM programmes as partners and was coordinating one programme. Taking into account the small size of the systems, this can be seen as a substantial number.

Recognition of qualifications. The Nordic countries have longstanding traditions of mobility within the region. Norway and Iceland are the two countries that have long traditions of sending students to other Nordic countries (Nyborg, 1996), due to national capacity issues. For instance, in the 1930s, about 40\% of Icelandic students studied abroad, and the number was still around 35\% in 1990 (Maassen, Nokkala, & Uppstrøm, 2005). Due to this high level of mobility, the issue of recognition has been of historical relevance. Reykjavik declaration in 2004 (Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Diplomas, Degrees and Other Qualifications in Higher Education) replaced the earlier Sigtuna agreement from 1975 and became the regional follow-up of the LRC (which all countries ratified and almost fully implemented). The agreement states that “qualification in the field of higher education of the Nordic countries shall be given full mutual recognition”. However, this formulation does not guarantee automatic recognition, and while this has been discussed as a possible option in more recent years, no definite decision has been reached.

While the systems seem rather cohesive, a 2007 report from NORRIC suggested that at the time problems with recognition were identified (NORRIC, 2007) and that when it comes to professional licencing, the picture becomes considerably more complex (Elken, Hovdhaugen, et al., 2014).

\textsuperscript{14} http://www.cimo.fi/programmes/nordic_master


\textsuperscript{16} Agency for internationalisation in Finland.
### Discussion and conclusion

Table 1 summarizes the findings of the study for the four regions and the three policy areas.

As can be seen, the degree of regional policy coordination in the four regions under study ranges from effectively no coordination in the Balkans to positive coordination in the Baltics and the Nordics. It should be noted that in Balkans and the Baltics regional coordination was also pushed for by the international community, in particular the EU. Especially in the Balkans, primarily due to its (post-) conflict characteristic, regional coordination is a predominantly politically driven and financially supported from abroad. Thus, in both the Balkans and the Baltics some of the developments may indicate a higher degree of coordination (even strategic coordination), although actual cooperation is rather limited. Another interesting case is the Benelux where, despite the highest degree of coordination overall through a political and economic union, policy coordination in higher education is not as developed (between negative and positive coordination).
Table 1 – Overview of degrees of coordination, measures and types of convergence for the three policy areas in the four regions under study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree of coordination</th>
<th>Balkans</th>
<th>Baltics</th>
<th>Benelux</th>
<th>Nordics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effectively no coordination (with minor elements of negative coordination) / symbolic strategic coordination</td>
<td>Positive coordination (with elements of symbolic strategic coordination)</td>
<td>Between negative and positive coordination in HE (overall a political and economic union)</td>
<td>Positive coordination (some elements of policy integration)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA and accreditation convergence</td>
<td>European sigma and delta – discursive (in 4 out of 8 countries also decisional)</td>
<td>Regional sigma – decisional</td>
<td>European delta – decisional</td>
<td>Regional sigma – practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint degrees convergence</td>
<td>European delta – discursive</td>
<td>Regional sigma – discursive</td>
<td>European delta for BE and NL – decisional</td>
<td>Regional delta – decisional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of qualifications convergence</td>
<td>European delta – decisional</td>
<td>Regional sigma – decisional</td>
<td>European delta – decisional</td>
<td>Regional delta – decisional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional sigma – discursive</td>
<td>Regional sigma – decisional</td>
<td>Regional sigma for FL and NL only – practice</td>
<td>European delta for Wallonia and France – practice</td>
<td>European delta – practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of qualifications convergence</td>
<td>European delta – decisional</td>
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<td>Regional sigma – discursive</td>
<td>Regional sigma for FL and NL only – practice</td>
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Concerning measures and types of policy convergence, there is variance with regards to types of issues and regions. In the area of QA and accreditation, convergence ranges from discursive (Balkans) to partial practice convergence in the Benelux and the Nordics, i.e. practice convergence limited to some of the countries in the region. In the Balkans, the dynamic is driven primarily by European developments while in the other three regions there is a combination of European delta and regional sigma convergence.

In the area of joint degrees, convergence is less pronounced, limited to discursive convergence in the Balkans and the Baltics, with more convergence in the other two regions, though in the Benelux it is piecemeal, i.e. limited to one or two countries or systems in the region.

In the area of recognition of qualifications, there is primarily decisional convergence in all four regions, with Benelux and Nordics also exhibiting elements of convergence in practice, while regional sigma convergence in the Balkans is still at the discursive level. The combination is primarily that of European delta convergence (i.e. convergence towards full implementation of the LRC) and regional sigma convergence which concerns steps made towards automatic recognition.

What is interesting that outcome convergence has not been identified, which may have to do with how it is conceptualized and operationalized (which will be discussed below).

Concerning the relationship between how policy coordination is organized and the extent of policy convergence it can generally be observed that higher degrees of coordination do lead to a higher extent of convergence, with a caveat that such higher convergence is sometimes present in part of the region and not the region as a whole. Whether such piecemeal convergence is just a stage in the development, i.e. other countries in the region will follow up suit, remains to be seen. However, it does indicate that linguistic similarities and to some extent also historical legacies are a strong facilitating factor (see Benelux and Nordics), unless historical legacies also include intra-regional conflicts (Balkans). Having in mind that some of the regions studied here seem to show a degree of coordinated presence in the international arena in some issues, the regional level is of relevance for analysing actor coordination in multi-level processes.

With respect to the theoretical framework, what emerges is that the level of coordination is not a linear process towards more coordination. Instead, coordination can also be back and forth (e.g. early Baltics vs. later Baltics) and regional coordination may be pushed for by the EU. This shows that while coordination represents an intentional decision by countries to cooperate, the incentive for this can also be provided externally. However, what also emerged was that where such coordination incentives are proposed externally, coordination can be rather symbolic (i.e. Balkans,
and to some extent Baltic). This suggests that for higher levels of coordination, it would seem that coordination needs to be considered appropriate by the participants, not only imposed from outside. Pollitt’s conceptualizations of convergence yielded a useful heuristic for examining convergence processes. Where convergence is often referred to as a broad concept that is not sufficiently explained, the heuristic was useful to distinguish different outcomes. However, the extent to which the heuristic was able to account for complex empirical realities is another matter. First, convergence is in Pollitt’s framework presented as linear and incremental, suggested that e.g. decisional convergence is a prerequisite for practice convergence. What this study showed empirically was that this can be challenged. For instance, discursive and practice convergence can take place without decisional convergence. This can particularly take place in regions where there is a high degree of cooperation through various and sometimes informal channels that can lead to practice convergence (i.e. Nordics).

Second, the operationalization of discursive convergence may need more nuance. As was indicated in this study, some policy ideas are rather ambiguous and the fact that they appear on policy agendas in different countries or regions does not necessarily suggest convergence, given that what is understood by these issues, i.e. domestic translations, might differ. While one could link this to practice convergence, this cultural-normative convergence is not only related to practice, it is also related to shared norms and ideas.

Third, outcome convergence proved to be difficult for the kind of issues at hand here. Pollitt defines outcomes convergence as a situation where both the intended and unintended outputs and outcomes of reforms or changes become converging. In the context of higher education, it seems that it would in most cases be rather unlikely due to the nature of higher education institutions. Another issue here is the difficulty of measuring similarity, regarding many issues in higher education that are complex and multi-faceted, e.g. if the outcome convergence would be an increase in quality of HE then the question becomes how one measures quality. Moreover, a number of policy issues in higher education have multiple or unclear aims. For example, quality assurance concerns both accountability and enhancement of quality.

Finally, the outcomes-perspective also seems to assume a rational view on policy processes, and would likely be not as useful for processes that show elements of garbage can like processes (for discussion about the garbage can model, see Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972). One can argue that the model Pollitt presents is inherently rational, and many of the weaknesses with having a stages perspective for policy analysis (Sabatier, 2007) are also visible in using such a linear and rational model for analysing convergence. This does, however, not reduce the overall usefulness of the convergence model as a heuristic.
Regarding the distinction between sigma and delta convergence, the study showed very few cases of delta convergence on regional level (i.e. Nordic Masters programme being the one example). In this context, it is particularly interesting to observe what will happen in Benelux – e.g. will Luxembourg start to use NVAO given that it is a strong QA agency in its vicinity, and that they are already borrowing QA from abroad? The empirical material in this study suggests that regional delta convergence requires high levels of regional coordination and established administrative capacity. Given that there is increasingly well articulated European ‘model’ in many of these areas, what would be the perceived added value of developing additional regional models that would possibly compete with European ones? In other words, one could argue that the emergence of regional models may be difficult in a context that is already saturated by existing European models.

Overall, the study examined a phenomenon that has been rather understudied in higher education literature, in particular in a comparative manner. For some of these regions (Balkans and Baltics), there are barely any studies that would explicitly examine regional structures for coordination of higher education, and the convergence processes on regional level in the context of European integration. These processes are also documented with limited data.

For future studies, more detailed accounts as well as accounts focusing on other policy issues could be developed. Tackling four regions with three issues provided to be a rather lengthy endeavour, and for this reason, the analysis focused on the broad comparison. We argue that this provides a starting point for more in-depth further studies on the issue. Furthermore, studies could focus in depth on specific kinds of convergence, i.e. further develop the notion of discursive convergence from a more cultural-cognitive aspect.
References


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