EU Higher Education as Soft Power in Neighbouring Countries: A Projection of Influence by Compelling Means

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Tertiary Education is considered to be a key driver in the development of economies and societies, and therefore is progressively gaining importance in the aid and cooperation policies of international organisations such as the European Commission, the OECD, UNESCO or the World Bank. This paper analyses the importance of European higher education as a mechanism for projecting soft power within the context of globalisation, political upheavals, and economic recession. First, it situates the concept of soft power within the context of higher education policy-making. Then, it explores why the creation of the EHEA is likely to be considered a model for educational reforms in other regions of the world, the importance of international cooperation in this field to foster global influence, and how the EU uses higher education to project soft power in its neighbourhood. It also examines the different ways in which the Bologna Process is influencing reforms beyond Europe, and the mechanisms and policy vehicles applied by the EU to promote soft convergence of higher education agendas. This paper namely focuses on the EU’s Tempus Programme and its implementation in two countries: Egypt and Russia. Each of these countries presents a different reality and reflects a unique case with regard to its relations with the EU. The relation existing between the investment in policy dialogue and cooperation in the area of higher education and other agendas is reasonably evident, and is magnified by the conciliating essence of education. The analysis presented throughout this paper reveals that the EU is not only aware of the importance of higher education as a tool of soft power, but is also making effective use of it and is ready to increase its investment in this resource.

Key words: soft power, higher education, convergence, Bologna Process, EU neighbourhood, Tempus

“More powerful than the mighty armies is an idea whose time has come.”
– Victor Hugo

Introduction

In a globalised world, the importance of knowledge, research and innovation, the so-called “knowledge triangle”, have changed forever the mission and function of the higher education sector and the social responsibility of universities, which are considered to be essential engines for knowledge development and human capacity building (Collins and Rhoads, 2010; Peters and Besley, 2006; Rhoads and Torres 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004; European Commission, 2013). The Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) constitute a European response to the phenomenon of globalisation in the field of higher education. Today, 47 countries have signed the Bologna Declaration – the most far-reaching and ambitious reform of higher education ever undertaken (Adelman, 2008;
Vienna-Budapest Declaration, 2010). Although Bologna is an initiative of the Council of Europe, the external dimension of the Bologna Process has increasingly gained importance over time, and has developed in parallel with the European integration process and the extension of the EHEA. The European Commission - a consultative partner of the Process whose Member States count for approximately 58 per cent of the signatory countries - retains a leading role in the implementation of higher education reforms which exert a considerable impact on non-EU Member States.

Education has been used throughout history as a weapon to conquer hearts and minds of adversaries, and to corrupt their youth with exogenous gods, goods, heroes and ethics (Tomusk, 2006a). This perception leads us to revise the notion of “soft power” developed by Nye, and in particular to consider higher education as a source of soft power. This paper will analyse the importance of higher education, and its role in the knowledge triangle, as a leading actor in the development of prosperous, stable and democratic societies within the context of globalisation, political upheavals, and economic recession. On the one hand, it will explore why and how European higher education dynamics are likely to be considered a model for educational reforms in other countries and regions, and beyond the Bologna signatory states. On the other hand, it will analyse the interest of the EU in promoting its higher education agenda in neighbouring countries, the prominent position of higher education in the projection of soft power, and the importance of international cooperation in this field to foster global influence. Likewise, it will explore the policy vehicles and the methods applied by the European Commission to promote “soft convergence” (Rutkowski, 2007) of higher education agendas, such as collaborative projects, policy dialogue and “epistemic communities” (Haas, 1992).

The two countries selected as case studies, Egypt and Russia, are part of the Tempus Programme, which aims to support the modernisation of higher education systems in EU neighbouring countries. Both countries are struggling to reform their universities, face structural problems, and are currently experiencing social and political unrest. Since they belong to two different regions of the world, they also provide this research with geographic diversity and elements of contrast. It is worth mentioning that both countries experienced a remarkable expansion of higher education in the last two decades, which triggered a paradigm shift that transformed the actual needs and demands of each society. Throughout this paper, several insights will be provided regarding the manner in which the EU’s promotion of its higher education model has promoted a values-based global governance model, and has involved a close interaction of actors in the milieus of high politics and academia.

Some questions arise regarding why the European higher education reforms have gained such a degree of relevance in neighbouring countries, and why the EU has increased the budget of programmes such as Tempus given the massive budget cuts in most EU Member States. Can universities change the course of history by supporting the social and economic development of societies? Is the EU trying to build a European “City upon a Hill”2 by claiming a leading position in the production of knowledge? If so, why? These critical questions will be addressed throughout this paper and will support the final conclusions.

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2 English-born Puritan leader John Winthrop invoked the notion of a “city on a hill” for the first time in 1630. “The concept became central to the United States’ conception of itself as an exceptional and exemplary nation” (Dictionary of American History, 2003).
Exploring the concept of “soft power”

A state’s military and economic power (i.e., “hard power”) most certainly influences the actions and behaviour of other nations. However, in international politics a state is also able to attain its objectives through indirect means; for instance, “other countries [may] admire its values, emulate its example, aspire to its level of prosperity and openness. This soft power—getting others to want the outcomes that you want—co-opt people rather than coerces them” (Nye, 2004). Soft power has “always been a key element of leadership. The power to attract—to get others to want what you want, to frame the issues, to set the agenda—has its roots in thousands of years of human experience” (Nye, 2004). According to Joseph S. Nye, author of the concept, “soft power is more than just persuasion or the ability to move people by argument, though that is an important part of it. It is also the ability to attract, and attraction often leads to acquiescence.” Thus, soft power is measurable and different from hard power if the subject identifies it as being inherently attractive (Noya, 2006). Lukes (2005) and Noya (2006) consider that the effectiveness of soft power in legitimising the power source/product depends on the ability of the subject to internalise the philosophy behind certain ideas, which is based on the reputation of the power source, and actual benefits of the power product or method of power application.

Following the introduction of the concept by Nye, many authors have written about the reliance of the EU on soft power instruments to influence world affairs (Casey, 2006; Speck, 2011; Smith, 2006; Colson, 2009; Joannin, 2009; MacShane, 2012). Although some scholars have already written about the soft power of education (Rutkowski, 2007; Lo, 2011; Yang, 2010; Zewail, 2010; Bieber and Martens, 2011; Collins and Rhoads, 2010; Trilokekar, 2010; Jones, 2010; Nye, 2004a), there has been surprisingly little research regarding the role of European higher education policies as a source of EU soft power in neighbouring countries. It is this gap in the academic literature that my paper aims to fill.

How is higher education a source of soft power?

The information revolution has altered politics and societies: today more people have faster access to more information than at any previous time in history. Knowledge means power, and knowledge labour responds to different stimuli and political demands than does an industrial workforce (Nye, 2004). Daniel Bell (1973) was one of the first authors to assert that in a post-industrial society skills produce more economic growth than capital and labour. To the degree that economic growth is itself a cornerstone for projecting hard power and — most importantly for this paper — projecting the sort of persuasive power that underlines soft power, Bell’s assertion can be seen as an important precursor for Nye’s later development of the soft power concept. Although it was previously believed that higher education only benefits those who obtain it (Collins and Rhoads, 2010), today it is acknowledged that these benefits go far beyond the mere socio-economic progress of diploma-holders. Highly-educated citizens are extremely important in order to ensure the social and economic development of a nation (Chapman, 2009; Collins and Rhoads, 2010; European Commission, 2013). However, all these assumptions evoke the question of who has access to different forms of knowledge (Brennan, 2008). As it will be explored in the analysis of the case studies, increasing the number of university graduates does not always imply more individual or collective socio-economic progress.
According to Bell (1973), a knowledge society presents two main characteristics: on the one hand, its sources of innovation are highly dependent on research and development; on the other hand, the largest proportion of Gross National Product and employment rates are connected with the knowledge field. As can be easily deduced, these two main features fall under the principal missions of universities: research and education. Tertiary education can therefore be considered a source of soft power to the extent that it is able to revalue human capital, produce knowledge, innovate, and ultimately create jobs, growth, equity, social cohesion and welfare. Nye (2004) stresses that “we consider a country powerful if it has a relatively large population, territory, natural resources, economic strength, military force, and social stability”. Focusing on the last characteristic of Nye’s list, it can be presumed that the above-mentioned growth, cohesion and welfare produced by a knowledge-based society are major foundations of social stability, an intrinsic aspiration of any nation or society. To the extent that achieving social stability requires an application of state social power, rather than exclusively state military and economic means, the policy goals associated with the promotion of higher education, including, inter alia, social stability, convincingly falls within the rubric of a state’s soft power.

Another aspect that needs to be taken into account is that the nature of tertiary education implies that the ideas which originate in higher education institutions can influence the perceptions of students who may eventually become business, government or civil society leaders. Thus, affecting the way these people are educated, either by influencing national higher education policies in other countries, or by hosting them as international students in the country willing to exert soft power, may shape the way these future leaders relate to the source of power. This latent influential nature has been acknowledged in high political circles worldwide. For instance, in 2001 former US Secretary of State Colin Powell underlined the relevance of higher education in the exercise of soft power by stating: “I can think of no more valuable asset to our country than the friendship of future world leaders who have been educated here” (Nye, 2004a). The European Commission also recognises that “Europe’s political and commercial success in the world is dependent on future decision-makers in third countries having a better understanding of, and closer ties with, Europe” (European Commission, 2001, 3).

During the years of the Cold War, the Soviet Union openly used education as a main information channel to spread communist ideology worldwide, while the US made education an important dimension of its foreign policy as a response (Tomusk, 2006a). In a recent poll involving 43 countries, 79 per cent of respondents said that what they most admire about the United States is its leadership in science and technology (Zewail, 2010). Similarly, the 2012 Pew Global Attitudes Survey found that a majority or plurality of respondents in 18 out of 20 countries surveyed said they admired the United States for its scientific and technological advances (Pew Global Attitudes, 2012). This is a clear vindication of Nye’s foundational soft power theory regarding the power a state can reap by promoting shared social values. Other industrialised countries such as Canada consider overseas development assistance in the area of higher education as foundational features of their foreign policies (Trilokekar, 2010). Emerging economies like China have also been consciously promoting international exchange and collaboration in education and culture using soft power to expand their global influence (Yang, 2010).

Direct evidence of the EU’s consideration of higher education as a source of soft power

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As far as the EU is concerned, the international reputation of certain EU Member States and European higher education institutions is well-known across the globe. For instance, the popularity of the inclusive higher education systems of the Nordic countries, or the prestige of institutions such as Cambridge, Oxford or the Sorbonne, are common denominators worldwide. However, non-Europeans do not yet identify the EHEA as a single entity, but rather as a range of very different countries (Academic Cooperation Association, 2005). Although Europeans acknowledge the importance of the external dimension of their higher education reforms, and some initiatives to enhance the attractiveness of the EHEA such as Tempus and Erasmus Mundus have already been implemented, the concept of a “brand Europe” still has to be further investigated and promoted. A good example of EU branding in the area of higher education is without doubt the successful European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS), which has become an example of best practice for other nations in terms of promoting educational mobility, and whose name will be used to brand the new EU programme, Erasmus+.

According to Ahmad Zewail (2010, 80), the winner of the 1999 Nobel Prize in Chemistry and President Obama’s science envoy to the Middle East, “[t]he soft power of science has the potential to reshape global diplomacy.” It is not a coincidence that the recent communication from the European Commission (2013) European higher education in the world and a European Commission officer interviewed within the framework of this research mention the “soft diplomacy” of EU cooperation programmes in the area of higher education, and avoid the word “power”. The officer recognised that:

“[All European Commission] higher education programmes are important to enhance soft diplomacy. […] Education has been a key issue that they all [countries] want to discuss. […] They may not want to discuss about the freedom of the press or the media, but they do want to talk about education. […] Education is a positive sector, everyone is willing to agree and to cooperate, everyone embraces that they have to improve, that they have to invest because it is the future.”

As noted by Joseph Nye (2004), soft power “uses an attraction to shared values, and the justness and duty of contributing to the achievement of those values.” Education is a factor that contributes to the European ability to act in a capacity that stimulates relationship generation by cognitive social value (Jones, 2010). In other words, if considered that the acquisition of knowledge is related to observing others’ examples within the context of social interaction, experience, and influence; the positive perception of European higher education in other countries has a significant potential to attract, and thus to promote acquiescence, a crucial aspect in the successful exercise of soft power. Thus, through the objectives and approach of its policies and programmes with other countries, it is clear that the EU considers higher education to be an effective source of soft power or “soft diplomacy” able to influence the global political agenda.

EU Cooperation with Third Countries in the Field of Higher Education

The external dimension of the EHEA must be analysed from different perspectives, since it is influenced by policy fields that go beyond mere educational policies. In fact, EU programmes related to the external dimension of the Bologna Process usually receive funds from multiple budget lines linked with different policy areas, and promoted from diverse perspectives.
Although education remains a competence of the EU Member States, the European Commission highly supports the convergence of higher education systems in the Member States. The involvement of the European Commission in the reforms of higher education systems in Member States has always been somewhat paradoxical. According to Croché (2009), although Member States reaffirm their sovereignty over higher education, they expect the European Commission to help them solve their problems and accompany their strategies.

Nevertheless, the lack of competence at the EU level and the broad variety of systems do not always allow an effective and parallel implementation of higher education reforms in all Member States. The reforms applied at the national/regional level have to be assimilated to different legal frameworks, and face a patchwork of educational systems, traditions and ideologies. This reality usually causes a lack of homogeneity and a multi-speed process, which pose numerous challenges in terms of recognition and comparability of studies. In this sense, it is ironic to consider that the idea of exerting soft power in the field of higher education within and beyond the EU is closely related to an external dimension increasingly piloted at the European level.

The prioritization of higher education underlines its importance in boosting social development and economic growth, and ensuring the sustainability of the progress achieved. Thus, the promotion of the “knowledge triangle”, the socio-economic needs of society, and equality issues should be at the core of any idea of progress. The new European programme Erasmus+, which will put all the current EU educational programmes under a common umbrella, foresees more resources for education, especially for higher education, whose budget is expected to increase by 85 to 95 per cent compared to the previous programme. The European Commission emphasises in this way the importance of higher education for jobs, growth and innovation (Vassiliou, 2012; European Commission, 2013). A European Commission officer interviewed for this research asserted that:

“There will be one brand comprehensive programme and there will be Tempus-like actions underneath them, […] plus we are opening Erasmus. Not Erasmus Mundus, but Erasmus-type actions to enhance two-way mobility back and forth. So this support that we have now for those countries will continue and will be increased in terms of mobility. […] [t]here is always a Ping-Pong game between simplification and comprehensive, and then identification and clear set. […] This time it goes towards putting things together, maybe later they will go apart, it does not matter, the important thing is that this kind of support will be maintained”.

This comment suggests that the content of programmes related to the external dimension such as Tempus or Erasmus Mundus will not only remain the same, it will widen in scope and current mechanisms will be improved.

The EU not only contributes to the development of the EHEA, it also promotes EU-like reforms in higher education in other parts of the world, especially in neighbouring countries (Vassiliou, 2012; European Commission, 2013). As will be explored later in this paper, among other reasons, the EU engages in these policies in the pursuit of influence, recognition, information, and socio-economic stability in its surrounding regions.
The European Consensus on Development specifies the idea of promoting an EU-like model of development based on its democratic values and experience (European Union, 2005). This approach certainly highlights the interest of the EU in employing an important soft power resource such as development aid cooperation to influence other countries through the promotion of its governance model.

The European Commission, the world's second-largest multilateral funding body for education, makes use of this powerful tool to influence policy (Rutkowski, 2007). Although the European Commission does not establish any duty to reimburse the funds invested in cooperation programmes and projects as the World Bank does, its provision of support is not free of conditions (Rutkowski, 2007). In the field of higher education there is a clear persuasion towards convergence with the Bologna principles and the European higher education reform agenda. The European Commission (2013, 10) acknowledges that “today’s developing countries will be the emerging economies of tomorrow”, thus contributing to the development of a particular country will contribute to the creation of long-term strategic links. When referring to the influence of International Governmental Organisations (IGOs) in the global educational agenda, Rutkowski (2007) coins the concept of global “soft convergence”, which is partially based on Nye’s concept of soft power. IGOs aim at influencing and converging policy agendas in such a way that the local, national, and global dimensions converge into the recognition of a similar policy. In the field of education, this convergence is, and will continue to be, a “soft convergence” (Rutkowski, 2007). This is mainly due to the fact that education is very much connected with cultural aspects and local realities that are usually difficult to ignore or homogenise.

The EU maintains very close relations with its neighbours, which are in many cases former European colonies. This status matters in the sense that some cultural and linguistic affinity still remains, and as mentioned before, cultural aspects and local realities are key elements in the process of educational “soft convergence”. From an economic perspective and due to their proximity, most of these countries are highly dependent on the European market, not only in terms of imports, but also of exports.

For many years the World Bank supported the idea that primary education was a better investment than secondary and tertiary education based on the fact that unit costs for the first are small compared to the additional lifetime income or productivity connected with literacy (Psacharopoulos, 1988). From the beginning of the 21st century, a more sophisticated analysis motivated a progressive shift in the discourse of the World Bank regarding the importance of higher education for the economic development of a nation (Collins and Rhoads, 2010; World Bank, 2000). However, the rules under which the development of higher education systems in developing countries is occurring, and the ideologies that influence these reforms are, according to Collins and Rhoads (2010), a matter of concern. These aspects will be further discussed in the sub-section of this paper related to trade policy.

The European external aid policy foresees a major investment in the development of neighbouring countries, and highlights the importance of the European model (Vassiliou, 2012; European Commission, 2013). The provision of funds for the implementation of higher education reforms backs the influences of the lending organisations over the recipient country. Governments and higher education institutions in developing countries increasingly subscribe to international standards.
and benchmarks seeking to gain prestige and competitive advantage in their local, and increasingly international environment (Chapman, 2009). They want their graduates to meet US, EU and other international standards (Chapman, 2009). This trend is magnified by developed countries and international-ranking systems whose objectivity is likely to be in question. Based on the type of relationships between universities in developing countries and the World Bank, Collins and Rhoads (2010, 182) introduce the concepts of “neo-colonialism”, referring to the new forms of global hegemony promoted by powerful nations and their institutions, and “neoliberalism”, which represents “an economic ideology by [which] weaker nations may be brought into greater alignment with global trade initiatives”. These notions will be linked with the concepts of “academic capitalism” and “academic capitalist knowledge regime” in the sub-section below related to trade policy.

Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP)

The EU is a soft power in terms of foreign policy for several reasons, but mainly because the hard power of the EU still remains in the hands of the Member States. When referring to CFSP, the Treaty of Lisbon highlights through different provisions aspects such as the consolidation of democracy, multilateral cooperation, sustainable development, or peace preservation (European Union, 2007). In one way or another, these provisions are linked to the promotion of EU-like reforms and the “soft convergence” or “soft diplomacy” encouraged by most EU international cooperation programmes. Higher education is a policy area where most countries are willing to collaborate, and which is directly linked to the social fabric, and the production of knowledge and future leaders in a country. Therefore, there is a logical connection between higher education policy convergence and its influence over other strategic policy fields for the CFSP, such as foreign policy, defence or trade.

There is thus a clear link between higher education policy convergence and EU foreign policy. It is worth noting that in order to better apply soft power in foreign policy, three conditions must be present: 1) the intended target exists in a functioning marketplace of ideas; 2) the state can communicate through a credible source which can deliver a repeated message that speaks to recipients at an emotional level and the target is open to communication; and 3) the political environment is such that individual attitudes have an impact (Kroenig et al. 2010). These conditions clearly tie in with the EU’s promotion of higher education policies, and following the case-study analysis in this paper, they will be further addressed in the final conclusion. For now, it can be stated that in the realm of higher education the EU pursues programmes which meet these three conditions by making use of different instruments. For instance, in the case of higher education, the Tempus Programme is financed by several financial instruments depending on the country involved in the project or action, and the priorities established by the EU and the target country. Cooperation between institutions of higher education tends to provide a steadying and civilising influence (Yang, 2010). Although measuring the externalities of higher education beyond the individual benefits is a complex task (Jimenez and Patrinos, 2008), higher education and the production of knowledge guarantee social and economic stability in a country (Collins and Rhoads, 2010), and therefore can play a crucial role in reducing poverty and ensuring security in a region, if certain economic and social equity standards are respected. It is in this sense that the importance for the EU of promoting higher education reforms and university cooperation globally, and particularly among neighbouring countries, can be appreciated.
All the above analytical connections made in this sub-section to assess the importance of higher education for the CFSP can be very well summarised through the following statement made by a European Commission officer interviewed for this research:

“Education is the foundation of any kind of development. It has a higher role in the political agenda of the EU, in all countries neighbouring the EU, but also in the United States, Australia, China and other parts of the world. Finally, politicians have realised what educators always knew, that if you do not have good education, you could not develop [economically] otherwise. […] But education is also the foundation for political development and social development. The lower levels of education give the basis for everybody to have decent standards of living, to have a good behaviour and communication [skills], [to keep] good relations with each other, to understand a little bit better society, [to] be tolerant, etc. Higher levels of education give the highest qualifications, and there is where you get the leaders, where you get the future scientists, where you get the development of high-tech, and innovation. Everybody realises that education is not only important for the leaders, but for every level of society. If you think back in Europe 50 years ago, [or] 100 years ago, people behaved differently, they spoke differently, than they do now. Part of this process of changing, of being more open, more tolerant, calmer, less violent (we forget that this happened 50 years ago in Europe) is because more people have the opportunity to go through primary compulsory education, secondary education, and tertiary education. There is a direct correlation between education and people’s reliance on violence, [and] tolerance or intolerance toward others”.

European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)

The EU has political, social, economic, geostrategic, and security interests in establishing preferential links with its neighbours. The ENP has two regional dimensions considering the existing diversity of neighbours and their cultural and historical bonds: the Eastern Partnership and the Southern Mediterranean. The latter regional dimension is complemented by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), which is an intergovernmental organisation. Higher education and research is one of the six pillars of action of the UfM, which highlights the importance of creating a Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education, Science and Research Area. The Euro-Mediterranean University is a product of this initiative, which apart from acknowledging the opportunities offered by the EU programmes in the field of higher education, also finances, supports and promotes initiatives aiming at establishing cooperation links among universities located on both sides of the Mediterranean.

The current situation in the neighbourhood, especially since the Arab Spring, has pushed the Commission to design a new strategy with the objective of reviewing the existing relations with its vicinity. The EU is the major trade partner for most of its neighbours, thus sustainable economic development and job creation in partner countries benefit the EU as well (European Commission, 2011a; European Commission, 2013). The democratising discourse is more than ever present in all policy areas where the EU cooperates with its neighbours. The EU’s report entitled A New Response to a Changing Neighbourhood also mentions higher education, knowledge and innovation as important sources of stability and growth in the region, and by extension, as tools to assist with the democratisation process in the neighbourhood (European Commission, 2011a).

Apart from supporting the development of countries in the surrounding areas, the EU acknowledges the grand challenges of Europe in the future, and looks towards
its neighbourhood to find possible solutions. The European Commission (2011) refers to a neighbourhood full of well-educated, young and talented workers who can fill EU labour shortages in certain areas. Considering the increasingly aging population in the EU, and taking into account that the demand for higher education is influenced by the size of the school-age population, population growth, and access to and completion of previous educational levels (Chapman, 2009), European universities feel the growing need to cover their future shortages with non-EU students from countries with a young population. This aspect is acknowledged in the neighbouring countries as well. When asked why the EU invests so much in higher education cooperation with his country, a former Minister of Higher Education of Egypt replied:

“Upgrading the higher education systems in the neighbouring countries is the main objective of the European Commission because sooner or later there will be more exchanges of labour, students and everything. It is in the benefit of the EU to have modern higher education systems in the neighbourhood.”

As a matter of fact, the new strategy highlights the necessity of enhancing the mobility of citizens between partner countries, in particular for students, researchers and business people (European Commission, 2011a). The Bucharest Communiqué (2012) introduces a controversial objective: the automatic recognition of qualifications between Bologna signatory countries, thus involving 20 non-EU countries. This novelty might encourage other nations to adhere to the Bologna Process, but may also cause challenges in terms of quality assurance and control of qualifications awarded.

Apart from ensuring the adequate qualification and complementarity of incoming workers (Chapman, 2009), higher education helps tackle sources of instability and conflict in the region, and supports the adjustment of immigration flows. The position of higher education as a key actor in the production of knowledge and skilled labour is thus acknowledged as strategic and relevant, not only for the partner countries, but also for the EU itself. Besides influencing the minds of future leaders from neighbouring countries, immigration may have a positive effect on economic efficiency by offering workers the opportunity to find the jobs that best adapt to their skills and experience, while allowing companies to hire the most appropriate labour (Baldwin and Wyplosz, 2009). Thus, not only do recipient countries benefit from international partnerships and projects, these collaborations are also in the interest of the EU because of the stabilising character of higher education, its influence on the adjustment of migratory flows, and the complementarity and substitutability of incoming labour, which can have an impact on productivity levels. In addition, programmes like Tempus, the policy dialogue established by the European Commission, or the “epistemic communities” of experts that will be further described later in this paper, open the door to learn more about EU partners in other fields of interest for the EU such as trade or energy.

*International Trade and the Common European Trade Policy*

Trade, globalization, advances in information technology and communication, and increased competition in higher education have led to a different higher education marketplace (Birtwistle and McKiernan, 2008; Collins and Rhoads, 2010). Although some scholars argue that higher education should not be considered a traded service (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004; Slaughter and Leslie, 1997), education has already
been defined as a service within the WTO GATS, partially due to its global implications (Birtwistle and McKiernan, 2008; Knight, 2002). According to international trade law, education is a tradable service, which has significant implications for the higher education sector, and particularly for national policy-making processes (Knight, 2008). Due to this evolution, when developing policies at a national level, states have been increasingly forced to interact with other actors at the international level, such as large corporations, intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations, and special interest groups (Vlk, 2006).

The risks and benefits of this liberalisation will differ between sending and receiving nations, and developed and developing countries. It will furthermore depend on the priorities of different students, institutions, employers, and companies. To the extent that soft power is an “important source of attraction and power” (Nye, 2004), the EU’s commitments under international trade law such that foreign students have largely unhindered access to the EU’s higher education marketplace strongly suggests that the EU is aware of the attraction of its higher education system, and has leveraged this power via its WTO GATS commitments in the sector.

Selling education and training courses and programmes can be a profitable business with students, households and companies (Knight, 2008), and it therefore attracts the interest of private investors. The creation of this single market for higher education is a main aim of the EHEA, whose core purpose is to make European higher education more attractive and competitive. Entering the global higher education market as a single entity could translate diversity into the opportunity to provide a more varied offer, and therefore attract talent from other parts of the world. A competitive and prestigious higher education market based on quality, diversity and top research could also create an international benchmark and attract international investors. Given the importance of international benchmarking and reputation for soft power, it is easy to link the notion of soft power with the economic aspects behind the creation of the EHEA.

The lack of investment in public universities has happened for decades in many developing countries in which the World Bank has concluded that universities did not generate a sufficient return on investment (Santos, 2006; Collins and Rhoads, 2010). As a new form of colonialism, developing countries have in many cases been relegated to consumer status in the global knowledge economy and become dependent on foreign nations and cross-border higher education providers (Collins and Rhoads, 2010; Knight, 2008). The idea that foreign investors will progressively monopolise national higher education systems where underfunded public universities will struggle to be competitive is one of the reasons why the liberalisation of higher education is perceived as a threat in many nations.³

The public good regime that provides universities with a broad mission and sees them as institutions responsible for preparing citizens for public life (Collins and Rhoads, 2010) contrasts with the notion of “academic capitalism” or “academic capitalist knowledge”, which prioritises the generation of profits and the private interest before the public one in line with neo-liberalist ideology (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). These opposed perceptions about the mission of higher education divide Western societies, and is present within the EHEA itself. While continental Europe tends to perceive higher education as a public good responsible for preparing citizens for life in society, the vision of the UK is closer to the capitalist view that prevails in the US.

³ Only 42 of 155 WTO Members currently have GATS liberalisation commitments in this sector.
Trade has a positive impact on economic growth, and therefore is a booster in the knowledge-based society. Supporters of GATS believe that increased commercial cross-border education will help countries satisfy the growing demand for higher education and increase student access (Knight, 2008). However, while global income has increased with international trade, so has inequality in both developed and developing countries. There is certainly a need to widen student access to higher education, but the concern remains whether this wider access will only be effective for those who can afford it (Knight, 2008). According to Sidhu (2007), decisions reforming global markets and free trade are influenced by asymmetric power balances that allow more powerful economies to induce weaker nations to adopt trade agendas that might not be development-friendly. The same author introduces the concept of “new developmentalism”, which is defined as “the reconfiguration of trade liberalisation as development tool” (Sidhu, 2007, 203). This raises the paradox of bringing actions from aid to trade, from development cooperation to competitive commerce (Knight, 2008). Education has moved across borders through development cooperation, academic exchanges, and now also through commercial initiatives (Knight, 2008). This situation may create an imbalance between what developing societies and developed countries gain from higher education. The commercialisation of tertiary education may lead to new forms of colonialism and to a university system unaware of the needs and idiosyncracy of the society where it is embedded. Knowledge is power, the commercial control of knowledge engines and dissemination channels are major sources of soft economic power.

**EU Cooperation Programmes in Higher Education: The Tempus Programme**

The European Commission (2011) is currently funding five cooperation programmes with third countries in the field of higher education that from 2014 will fall under the umbrella of Erasmus+. This paper will only focus on the Tempus Programme, which apart from being relevant for the countries under study, is the longest-standing EU programme in the area of higher education cooperation with third countries, and therefore is able to provide more reliable signs of impact.

Sölter (2008) stresses that the success of Western nations in the exercise of soft power is embodied in ideas and values that can only be accomplished by exchange or rather transference in the dissemination of beliefs. In this sense, international EU programmes such as Tempus aim to “win hearts and minds” (Nye, 2004) in the global higher education landscape. As mentioned before, education is a “soft area” that has become a priority for most countries, and where both sides are interested and able to reach agreements more easily. Professor Hany Helal, former Minister for Higher Education of Egypt, stressed that Tempus has been a well-known and effective programme in Egypt, and the European Commission acknowledges this success. According to Helal:

“Egypt cannot avoid being harmonised with the Bologna Process because Europe is its closest neighbour, and there are many Egyptian scholars going to Europe for higher studies or research”.

Launched in 1990, the programme was a response to the need to include Eastern European countries in the major reforms being carried out in Western European higher education systems in view of future adhesions to the EU. Currently, the
Tempus Programme is in its fourth phase, and includes 26 countries\(^4\) committed to reform their higher education systems through international consortia with EU countries and other Tempus partner countries.

The description of the programme published on the website of the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) (European Commission, 2011d) highlights that Tempus “also aims to promote voluntary convergence of the higher education systems in the Partner Countries with EU developments in the field of higher education”. In most projects, the EU provides experience and examples of good practices within the framework of Bologna. Although many Tempus countries are not Bologna signatory states, and the rules of the Tempus Programme do not establish the requirement of introducing EU-like reforms, the European influence in the countries involved is evident. Considering that partnerships are established with European universities and involve European experts, problems are treated from a European angle, thus solutions also reflect this perspective. Tempus does not impose solutions, but it co-opts non-European countries from a soft power perspective through the exposition of European reforms as good practices and means to reach desired targets. This voluntary convergence endorsed by the Tempus Programme is very much connected with the notion of “soft convergence” coined by Rutkowski (2007) and described above.

The Arab Spring and the unrest existing in many parts of the EU surrounding countries arguably result in higher education being viewed by the EU as a guarantor of future social stability and cohesion in the neighbourhood. As stated by a European Commission officer interviewed, higher education is considered to be an important mechanism to support civil society and youth, and the EU is aware of the necessity of ensuring the effectiveness of these cooperation mechanisms in neighbouring countries, especially after the Arab Spring. Erasmus\(^+\) foresees a substantial increase in the funds available for higher education, and highlights the importance of international cooperation in the area of higher education (European Commission, 2013), especially with the EU neighbourhood (Vassiliou, 2012).

An “epistemic community” is defined by Haas (1992, 3) as “a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area”. Considering this notion, another question that the current analysis opens is if the creation by the European Commission of a wide community of “Bologna Promoters”, as it was initially called, or “Bologna Experts”, was an attempt to build a European epistemic community in the area of higher education. Usually, epistemic communities support decision-makers in defining challenges, finding policy solutions and evaluating the outcomes of the policies applied. Thus, their influence can be considerable, and in terms of soft power could be seen as effective tools. This model of creating experts’ communities was also transposed to the Tempus partner countries with the conception of the Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE). According to Rutkowski (2007) certain IGOs have been able to bring together a considerable network of professionals that act as experts in the field of education (i.e., epistemic communities), such as the OECD with the PISA project (Bieber and Martens, 2011), or the idea of the knowledge bank introduced by the World Bank, and aiming to provide developing countries with information sources, research, expertise, and knowledge of best practices (Collins and Rhoads, 2010). Rutkowski (2007) asserts

\(^4\) Albania, Algeria, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Egypt, Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Moldova, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestinian Territories, Russia, Serbia, Syria, Tajikistan, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.
that it is actually being acknowledged as an expert that is more important for the 
OECD’s will to shape the global educational policy than the actual reality of the 
situation. IGOs are playing the roles of experts, and therefore, are influencing national 
educational policies (Rutkowski, 2007).

In terms of EU influence, it is also important to remark that most organisations 
and initiatives associated to or financed by the European Commission, such as 
EUROSTAT\(^5\) or EUROSTUDENT,\(^6\) are the main sources producing and interpreting 
empirical data about higher education reforms in Europe (Crochê, 2009). If 
acknowledged that educational indicators are a form of policy knowledge, more than 
simple representations of educational systems (Rutkowski, 2007), it may be assumed 
that the European Commission has built a space to command how knowledge is 
presented and shared. These facts may somehow be perceived as a means to exercise 
soft power in the field of higher education within the EU itself. However, this 
exercise of soft power can be extended to other parts of the world making use of 
comparable educational indicators released by other international organisations, such 
as the OECD and UNESCO within the framework of the International Standard 
Classification of Education (ISCED) (Rutkowski, 2007). According to Rutkowski 
(2007), policy knowledge empowers the information holders with the ability to 
influence policies. In fact, these notions are very much present in Nye’s definition of 
soft power and the role that information plays.

Countries try to improve their educational systems by meeting international 
standards (Bieber and Martens, 2011), when they rank low in international 
comparisons or do not follow the recommendations provided and are under pressure 
to either legitimate their domestic models, or adapt to them (Knill and Tosun, 2008). 
The higher the international pressure regarding a specific problem, the more 
convergence towards a recognised international model (Bieber and Martens, 2011) 
will become desirable. Since the race for world-class universities is part of the 
discourse of most ministries of education, news brought from encounters and 
 exchanges of recognised national experts with experts from other countries, especially 
Western countries, definitely gain the attention of national policy-makers in Tempus 
countries. Thus, the content of the information exchanged between these two 
communities may have a major impact on the policy-making strategy of the country 
that aspires to be at the level of the other.

Among other tasks, the National Tempus Office (NTO), funded by the EU, 
provides administrative support and centralises the activities of the different 
Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) in each country. They act as the interface of 
the European Commission in the Tempus partner countries, and provide activity reports 
and other relevant information related to the performance of the Tempus Programme 
in the recipient countries. A Tempus HERE is usually an academic, a university 
administrator, or a member of the national ministry of education who has in many 
cases preferential links with national decision-makers since they are normally 
appointed by their ministries.

The HEREs receive training through EU funds on higher education reforms, 
participate in projects, and promote these reforms at the national level. The national 
teams of HEREs take part in European trainings and seminars where they converge 
with the European community of Bologna Experts; organise thematic seminars, study 
visits and events on higher education reforms, and receive technical assistance from

\(^5\) EUROSTAT: Statistical office of the European Union
\(^6\) EUROSTUDENT: Project aiming to gather comparable data on the social dimension of European higher education.
EU Bologna Experts in various topics related to the reform of higher education systems. This group is likewise integrated in the virtual community and social network of European Bologna Experts financed by the European Commission. According to Rutkowski (2007, 243), “the ability to act as a group of experts in an epistemic community does allow the IGO to steer national systems towards soft convergence”. When asked whether the European Commission benefits from the direct link that some HEREs have with national decision-makers, a European Commission officer interviewed replied:

“you may have in some cases the minister’s nephew or his favourite person, but they have a link. They are used as advisers, so the exposure for them to Bologna, to Bologna Experts, to EU academics and partners is like having the ear of the ministry. […] The more exposure they have, the more we see them opening up. […] If you have complete outsiders, you might get immediately what is going on in the country, or what is not a good practice, but you will not be able to shape it afterwards.”

The European Commission wields soft power when it demonstrates how European reforms are advancing in a promising direction, and therefore become examples of good practice for the epistemic community of HEREs from Tempus partner countries. This influence is magnified when the target group constitutes a direct pipeline to universities and decision-makers themselves. Thus, it can be concluded that the European Commission has furthermore created an epistemic community of Bologna experts, who influence non-EU higher education systems towards soft convergence. “The ability to share information — and to be believed — becomes an important source of attraction and power” (Nye, 2004). Although the influence of the Bologna Experts in their countries in the European context varies enormously depending on the country of origin of the expert, their external influence beyond Europe is without doubt very effective, and is acknowledged by the European Commission itself.

“I think it [the HERE’s community] is the best value for money that we have in terms of programmes that we do […] Policy dialogue with the [EU] countries reinforces what these HEREs do inside their countries”.

The close link existing between the HEREs and their national decision-makers makes them a good target to push forward a “soft convergence” influenced by the European epistemic community of Bologna Experts. As the case studies will demonstrate, this “soft convergence” can be voluntary and not free of interest to policy-makers in the “converged countries”.

**Analysis of the countries under study**

**Republic of Egypt**

Egypt has traditionally been a political mediator and cultural beacon in the Arab world, and hence has played the role of an educational standard-bearer for the region. The development of a well-performing educational system, and in particular of an efficient and accessible higher education system, were identified for decades as major priorities during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak (Arab Republic of Egypt,

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7 Higher Education Reform Portal: www.bolognaexperts.net.
1996), which created a dedicated Ministry of Higher Education. The current uncertainty in Egypt has not only perturbed its own economic, social and political stability, but also that of the region.

As the current state of affairs reveal, Egypt has deep social, political and economic divisions. The angry young, who were in the vanguard of protests which resulted in the fall of the Mubarak regime and the secular urban sectors that supported them, felt frustrated when they had to choose between the last Prime Minister of the overthrown regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is clear that the Muslim Brotherhood ruled Egypt chaotically and paid more attention to the consolidation of its authority than to the economy. However, Islamists constitute a large fraction of the population, thus conferring wide powers to the security forces may be the only manner of keeping them away from politics. In any case, at this moment, a common understanding of what the joint interests of Egypt and the West may be is continuing to evolve. Moreover, the political evolution of the country is difficult to predict. But what is the link between the Egyptian revolution and higher education?

The current higher education system in Egypt is a product of the 1952 Revolution, whose flagship issues were social justice and economic growth. In the field of higher education, the Government eliminated fees, implemented a universal admission examination, expanded the number of places, and promised government employment for all university graduates (Cupito and Langsten, 2011). Enrolments in tertiary education grew accordingly, as well as the number of public universities, and to a lesser extent the number of private higher education institutions (Cupito and Langsten, 2011). Although higher education graduates are no longer assured a job in the public administration, the higher education sector continues to expand mainly due to significant demographic changes. The policies in place before the fall of Mubarak foresaw an increase in university enrolments of individuals between 18 and 23 years-old from 30 per cent to 40 per cent by 2022 (Helal, 2007). Although in terms of gender equity, women’s attainment of higher education has come close to that of men (Fahim and Sami, 2011), participation in higher education has continued to favour the wealthiest families - whose children held 40 per cent of university places (Cupito and Langsten 2011). This reality occurs because admission to universities depends on restrictive grade requirements, and students from wealthier families have more opportunities to obtain better marks due to an easier access to good-quality secondary education and private tutoring (Fahim and Sami, 2011; European Commission, 2011b).

Therefore, higher education reforms after the revolution of 1952 have not released the potential of tertiary education as a social elevator. They have definitely become a subsidy for the middle and the upper class, but have not boosted access to university for those living in poverty. As a result, the vicious cycle of poverty continues to perpetuate the current class structure and regional imbalances within the country (Fahim and Sami, 2011). The former Minister of Higher Education, when interviewed, confirmed this issue:

“One of main challenges is the percentage of access to higher education. We need to increase the current 30 per cent to 35, 40 or 45 per cent, which means much more investment, more challenges for quality, for mobility, for governance... I think the support of the European Commission on this would be highly appreciated”.

Apart from this challenge, Egypt faces other pressing issues that affect its higher education policy. The reported financial returns from investment in higher
education (1 per cent of the GDP in 2007-2008) appear to be relatively low, and the pressure on the Government’s budget is increasing as a result of an ever-growing demand for higher education – the Egyptian population will likely rise from about 80 million to about 112.5 million by 2035 (Fahim and Sami, 2011). With nearly 35 per cent of its population below age 15, Egypt will soon have a “youth bulge” that will make its impact felt on demand for education in the years to come, and will obviously affect universities (Fahim and Sami, 2011), which will have to manage combining cutbacks in public spending with a significant expansion of the student population.

Although Egypt allocates relatively similar amounts of resources to higher education compared to the OECD states, it allocates far fewer resources on a per-student basis; thus, its pattern of spending is not as internally efficient as it could be (Fahim and Sami, 2011). In 2010, a report produced by the OECD and the World Bank in cooperation with the European Training Foundation (funded by the EU) was released. The composition of this partnership reminds us of the concept of epistemic community, and the increasing reliance of developing countries on international benchmarking systems. The study highlighted four challenges faced by the higher education sector: (1) narrow access and limited opportunities for students; (2) poor quality of educational inputs and processes; (3) deficiencies and imbalances in graduate output relative to labour market requirements; and (4) under-developed university research capabilities and linkages to the national innovation system (OECD and World Bank, 2010). Unemployment rates among graduates more than doubled during the last decade and are surprisingly lower among the population with the lowest levels of study, followed by higher education graduates, and finally those with secondary education attainment (Fahim and Sami, 2011; El-Araby, 2009). These failures of the system were openly acknowledged by the former Minister of Higher Education when asked whether higher education is a key ingredient for prosperity, and what in the future should be the main axes of cooperation between the EU and Egypt in this field:

“Higher education is a key issue for sustainable development, but not all higher education disciplines, I think. This is what we mean when we talk about modernising and upgrading higher education to suit the labour market demands. This is what we are trying to do so far in Egypt. We invest a lot in higher education, but unfortunately we have difficulties in budgeting and financing as any other country. The new trend in Egypt is to try to enhance more the technical and technological higher education aspects. [The EU-Egypt cooperation in the future should concentrate] on strategic issues like governance and financing […] how we can continue financing a very demanding society and widening access to education, how we can govern huge higher education systems… These issues are not only related to a country, they are cross-border issues”.

Higher education creates individual or family expectations to get a better job, make a better living, and have a better position in society. However, when these expectations are not met and graduates are not able to find a job after completing their studies, the result is palpable frustration. If continuous dissatisfaction of a significant well-educated sector of the population – which is knowledgeable about the causes of this frustration – is combined with general discontent in terms of civil rights and democracy, the response is protest, and only a trigger is needed to prompt a potential revolution.

The 2011 revolution provided evidence of deep changes in Egyptian society: a new generation of young Egyptians with IT skills, and knowledge about the power of
new electronic communication technologies, had taken the floor to claim their rights and complain about a lack of opportunities and freedom. In countries where the circulation of information is restricted, the widespread use of mobile phones combined with social networking via the Internet can greatly contribute to the democratisation of societies and the shaping of public opinion (European Commission, 2011c). As Nye (2004) has stated, “[i]nformation is power, and today a much larger part of the world’s population has access to that power.” In this line and as stated by the European Commission officer interviewed for this research, the Commission funds programmes like Tempus with the aim of supporting civil society and youth in these countries through the provision of information and knowledge in a soft, but key area such as higher education that influences other geostrategic sectors. Although there is a clear connection between the Egyptian revolution and the structural problems of the national higher education system, it is necessary to clarify that the later only constitute one of the numerous reasons behind the eruption of the revolution.

Although Egypt is not a Bologna signatory country, Tempus has played an important role in the reform of the Egyptian higher education system since 2002, with most Egyptian universities participating in partnerships with EU universities. Most advances and reforms introduced in the Egyptian higher education system by Tempus are related to the quality of education in different disciplines, and the introduction of new concepts and programmes connected to the Bologna Process (European Commission, 2011e). All these measures to bring the Egyptian higher education system closer to international higher education standards and benchmarks, and more precisely to European ones, not only aim to improve the quality of the national higher education system, but also to help it enjoy international recognition and comparability.

Discussions and interviews with different HEREs from Egypt show the importance that cooperation with the EU in higher education has for Egyptian universities and society at large. The Egyptian HEREs are aware of the implications of globalisation for tertiary education, and therefore perceive this cooperation system and policy dialogue through programmes like Tempus as a necessary and beneficial feature for Egyptian universities. At the same time, the EU benefits from this soft area of convergence gaining exposure and getting to understand better the way Egyptian society functions. This better understanding of the social fabric has indirect far-reaching implications for harder policy areas at stake such as trade or security. The geostrategic position of Egypt in the Muslim world and its key role as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict make Egypt an important ally for the EU and vehicle for soft diplomacy in the region. Last but not least, as previously mentioned, a better-educated neighbourhood is able to create more stability and prosperity in a region, the expansion of higher education is accessible to low-income citizens and is in relative harmony with labour market demands.

If Egypt wishes to continue building on the previous advances in higher education, ignoring the mutual benefits of higher education cooperation with Western countries and the advances achieved through programmes like Tempus is not the response to the claims raised by the revolution. As far as the EU is concerned, higher education continues being a key focus of the EU’s activities in the region (European Commission, 2011c). Egypt remains actively involved in the Tempus Programme, especially through project partnerships at the university level. However, the impact of this bottom-up participation at the new policy level still requires time before it can be evaluated. Although the strategic importance of programmes like Tempus might not
always be appreciated in the political sphere, those involved in projects and policy discussions at the university level do not underestimate their beneficial impact. In fact, all HEREs interviewed hope that the current political crisis will not alter the foundations of what has been built through decades of cooperation with the EU in the area of higher education.

The Russian Federation

The Russian higher education system is undergoing an enormous transformation triggered on the one hand by internal socio-economic needs, and on the other hand by external factors such as Europeanisation and globalisation (Morgan and Kliucharev, 2012). In the 1990s, the willingness of the European Community to promote the European dimension of higher education extended to the newly independent post-Soviet states, with a strong emphasis on Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union (Gänzle et al. 2009). The Tempus-TACIS programme, which aimed to help new independent states adapt their higher education systems to the characteristics of a market economy, became an important source of financial assistance to support the transition and reform of the Russian higher education system (Gänzle et al. 2009). Russia was the largest recipient of projects from 2000 to 2006, which demonstrates the importance that the EU placed on the reform of the Russian higher education system (Gänzle et al. 2009).

In the context of an increasing strategic competition with the EU, one of the major aspirations of Russia within the framework of the Bologna Process is the possibility of attracting students and researchers from all over the world. These aspirations become more intensive when referring to selling higher education services at European prices to international students, especially from the CIS countries (Tomusk, 2006a). However, it is unclear whether countries in Central Asia, like Kazakhstan, that have also signed the Bologna Declaration, or Ukraine, another Bologna signatory state, will turn back to Mother Russia and return to the same higher education model from which they are trying to escape. According to Tomusk (2006a), in order to attract students from these countries, Russia may have to consider going back to the Soviet method during the Cold War, according to which elites in third countries were attracted and educated through the provision of free higher education.

The integration of Russia into the EHEA has influenced both its domestic and foreign policy (Gänzle et al. 2009). Most changes, especially the increasing international openness of Russian higher education, are mainly due to the influence of the Bologna Process (Morgan and Kliucharev, 2012), and a wide participation in international cooperation projects. The two main interests of Russia in international cooperation and dialogue with the EU concern aspects related to mobility and recognition of national diplomas (Gänzle, et al. 2009; Tomusk, 2006a). Some progress has been made regarding these two elements; for instance, the EU has loosened visa restrictions for Russian academics and researchers (Gänzle et al. 2009). However, more flexible visa regulations may also facilitate a brain drain of academics and researchers from Russia to the EU, especially if the unbalanced migratory pattern existing between both territories is taken into account.

The reforms promoted by the Bologna Process had a dual influence on the renovation of the Russian higher education system. While certain changes did not imply major efforts, the essence of others has not been fully understood, or supported by any legal provision (Motova and Pykkö, 2012). Russia has certainly opted for a “soft way” of implementing Bologna based on introducing general elements of the
reform and retaining many aspects of Russian higher education traditions (Tomusk, 2006a). This soft approach opens a debate about what is tolerable to Russian academia and acceptable to the supra-national promoters of the process, such as the European Commission, which fear that the implementation of Bologna à la carte (Tomusk, 2006a) may distort the essence of the whole process. If every single Bologna signatory country moves away from the structural changes necessary to ensure the successful implementation of reforms, the common denominator of the process, and therefore its reasons for being, might be at risk.

The Bologna Process has not only influenced the Russian higher education system, but also its labour market and its public sector (Gänzle et al. 2009). In addition, it has had an indirect impact on the federal budgets and the reforms of the administration (Pursiainen and Medvedev, 2005). This impact can be easily verified when taking the EU-funded projects and policy dialogues in the field of higher education as examples. As mentioned before, education is a soft area that influences other policy fields, and where all actors are ready to cooperate and agree on the need for introducing reforms.

The introduction of the Bologna Process in Russia was not received with enthusiasm by all members of the higher education community. A significant number of academic leaders argue that the decision to join Bologna was made by politicians without considering the will of academia (Tomusk, 2006a). In addition, a report of the European University Association (Crosier, et al., 2007) underlines that it was mainly in the western parts of the Russian Federation that higher education institutions were more interested in adapting to the reforms introduced in the rest of Europe, thus the positions for and against the Bologna Process were not merely based on ideology, but also on geographic implications. In any case, both supporters and detractors of the Bologna Process in Russia acknowledge the importance of Russia in world affairs, its cultural achievements, and a great level of academic excellence in higher education (Tomusk, 2006a). Nevertheless, this general perception ignores that the crisis of subsistence suffered by the Russian higher education system in the 1990s left its level of quality significantly below the standards of the Soviet period (Tomusk, 2006a). Even though the influence of Russia in the international sphere has arguably started to recover, many structural problems persist at home.

Further market integration and the evolution of the Bologna reforms put the EU in a position to influence the internationalisation of higher education, and raise the importance of higher education as an area of cooperation between Russia and the EU (Gänzle et al. 2009). Although Russia is unlikely to ever become an EU Member State, the external policy tools applied by the EU are the same ones which frequently lead to membership (Tomusk, 2006). According to Gänzle et al. (2009), the Bologna Process seems to be an application of the open method of coordination to incorporate non-EU countries into certain higher education policy targets, such as mobility and internationalisation. The Russian government is very much in favour of this approach, since it supports the idea of putting Russia at the same level as EU Member States (Gänzle et al. 2009). The intentions of Russia within the “Bologna Club” and the way they are perceived among other signatory countries remain somehow blurred. Tomusk (2006a) argues that having a Bologna member that conceives the EHEA as a means to enjoy full European and international recognition of degrees, and to set up European-style tuition levels for foreign students, imply a threat for Europe, and compromises the reputation of the EHEA as such.

One clear point is that the Bologna Process has made Russians talk again about the relevance and accomplishments of their higher education system (Tomusk,
2006a). However, there is not much coordination among the political, cultural and economic dimensions of the Bologna Process in Russia, and its contributions as far as application is concerned remains inconsistent (Tomusk 2006a). Although some experts worry about the possible adverse motivations that drove Russia to join the Bologna Process (Tomusk, 2006; Motova and Pykkö, 2012; Gänzle et al. 2009), it is evident that the opportunity of the EU to exert an impact on other relevant policy fields through this soft vehicle of influence is also very strategic and valuable. The position of the European Commission as a key player in the implementation of the Bologna Process increases EU soft power over the Russian higher education system, and some related sectors. Nevertheless, as an instrument linked to an inconsistent European foreign policy, Europe remains confused about the benefits and consequences of having Russia within the EHEA, and therefore it will have to better define its strategy in order to ensure future benefits and avoid negative side effects.

Conclusion

Many forces, such as the threatening economic climate, deep changes in funding and unprecedented global competition for the brightest students and scholars, are challenging as never before institutions of higher education. Among other aspects, the founders of the EHEA considered that entering the global higher education landscape as a single entity could help Europe gain a competitive advantage to attract talent and investment from other parts of the world, and therefore create a global benchmark for higher education. Given the importance of international benchmarking and reputation for soft power, it is easy to link the notion of soft power with the economic aspects behind the creation of the EHEA, and its external dimension.

In terms of reform processes, the Commission considers the modernisation of higher education as an essential priority for its international cooperation actions, and recognises the systemic impact of EU higher education reforms in other parts of the world. As deducted from the Bologna acquis, the official documents existing, and the interviews with experts from Tempus countries, the higher education reforms taking place in the EU have become global benchmarks and sources of inspiration worldwide, and namely in the EU vicinity. Given this favourable perception and the growing expansion of the Bologna Process, the EU has intensified actions and policy dialogue to project its soft power in the neighbourhood through higher education, and to target a niche of influence in these countries not fully exploited by other rich economies, namely the US.

The general interest of the EU in supporting the implementation of Bologna-like reforms in neighbouring countries presents different dimensions. From a political point of view, most EU neighbours are not fully democratic countries, or are corrupted democratic systems with deep internal discords, and where the rule of law is not fully respected. The role of higher education in democratisation processes contributes to the protection of EU interests in the neighbourhood and explains the reliance of the EU on this field to exert influence. As stated by the European Commission officer interviewed for this paper, higher education is considered to be an important mechanism for supporting civil society and youth, whose successful participation in society will guarantee future social cohesion and stability at the national and regional levels. Regarding the economic dimension, when enhancing soft convergence in the field of higher education, the EU acknowledges that the recruitment of international students is becoming increasingly decisive for the European universities losing public funds and a labour market where birth rates are
falling. The need to support innovation strategies and to cover these future shortages with international students and researchers is patent and has encouraged the EU to join the race for the planet’s top young minds, starting with a neighbourhood full of well-educated, young and talented people. In this line, improving the instruments for assessing and comparing non-EU qualifications through a common framework, while simplifying the access of talented future leaders to the EU, have become strategic instruments to address these major internal challenges and to create an informal network of future “European ambassadors” abroad.

In addition, highly-educated citizens are extremely important to the social and economic progress of a nation. Within this framework, the effective management of prosperity and equity issues has a spill-over effect that translates into more security, stability, and consumption. It should not be ignored that due to their proximity, most of these countries are highly dependent on the European market, and therefore a higher purchasing power in the neighbourhood will significantly benefit the European economy. These high levels of dependency on the EU also encourage neighbouring countries to support harmonisation and cooperation with the EU, especially in this vital sector for their economies. From a cultural angle, the fact that many EU neighbouring countries are former colonies means that some cultural and linguistic connections are also present. The EU takes into account all of these cultural proximities in order to exert soft power in its surrounding area through soft areas of convergence such as higher education.

However, as in the case of the two countries analysed in this paper, if the expectations created by higher education to acquire a better job, make a better living or attain a better position in society are not met or accessible to all sectors of the population, the consequence is tangible frustration. Both countries analysed in this paper have experienced a major expansion of higher education in the last two decades due to national policies or demographic changes. Nevertheless, in both cases, the expansion of tertiary education has not included poorer sectors of the population, or taken into account the demands of the labour market. Thus, although these evolutions have transformed the needs of society, they have not been accompanied by any significant reform plan. It is believed that the modernisation of higher education systems in the EU neighbourhood will re-establish the role of “social elevator” previously held by higher education in these countries. It is in this sense that tertiary education can be considered a source of soft power.

In order to assess whether the EU Tempus Programme is an effective vehicle for projecting European soft power in the neighbourhood, the three conditions for the successful exercise of soft power introduced by Kroenig et al. (2010) serve as a useful analytical prism.

1) *The intended target exists in a functioning marketplace of ideas.*

Higher education provides a functioning and competitive marketplace of ideas due to its soft nature. All states participating in Tempus agree on the importance of modernising higher education systems and the necessity of investing in this sector. Within the framework of Bologna, although the European modernisation agenda for universities has its endemic particularities, most of its general targets are common to meet the needs of other countries in the sector. The participation in European Bologna policy discussions of HERes with direct contacts within decision-making bodies in their countries, and the involvement of universities and ministries in Tempus projects with EU partners promote the effective exposure of the EU’s messages.
2) The state can communicate through a credible source which can deliver a repeated message that speaks to recipients at an emotional level, and the target is open to communication.

The European Commission has built a reputation in these countries as a credible source through long-standing initiatives such as the Tempus Programme, which, due to its ability to produce mutual benefits, is able to “win hearts and minds” (Nye, 2004) and offers the opportunity to deliver a repeated and attractive message. For many people working in the higher education sector in these countries, Tempus is their window to the rest of the world and the only fora where they have the opportunity to meet their counterparts outside their countries. Tempus actions, policy dialogue, and cooperation projects create exposure to European higher education reforms and experts, and encourage experts from Tempus countries to change their attitudes. The investment in creating epistemic communities of EU and non-EU experts who have credibility in their countries of origin, or enjoy direct connections with decision-makers contributes to the effective transmission of messages and new attitudes.

3) The political environment is such that individual attitudes have an impact.

The Tempus Programme provides the EU with exposure and many opportunities to establish direct or indirect policy dialogue with the participating countries from a top-down and a bottom-up perspective, and at the level of the élites. As a matter of fact, in most EU neighbouring countries “élites have a greater voice in influencing their state’s foreign policy than does the average citizen” (Kroenig et al., 2010, 416). Thus, the direct pipeline to ministries of education that the European Commission has in some cases through the epistemic community of HEREs constitutes a major channel of influence. The reform of tertiary education is nowadays a priority for most countries. Thus, in any cooperation system where both sides are interested, it is easier to avoid conflicts and to reach agreements, especially “if the target does not possess a clear understanding of its core material interests” (Kroenig et al., 2010, 416), and an appealing roadmap like Bologna is provided. Another aspect that influences the political environment for the effective use of higher education as a means of wielding soft power is the increasing inclination of governments and higher education institutions in developing countries to meet international standards and benchmarks (Chapman, 2009), usually from Western countries. In this sense, Tempus is presented as a bridge to get closer to European standards for higher education.

Indeed, not all perceptions are positive, and EU soft power campaigns through higher education may not succeed in all countries. The provision of higher education itself is a very profitable activity. Therefore, entities providing aid in the field of higher education are usually believed to have an implicit and underlying motivation to support developing countries. Knowledge is power, and the commercial control of knowledge production and dissemination sources are key means of wielding soft economic power. The European integration process in the field of higher education has not always been welcome in neighbouring countries due to the idea that foreign investors would progressively dominate national higher education systems through a commercially-oriented cooperation policy. In this context, developing countries defend their systems against the imposition of practices, and support the implementation of two-way cooperation schemes. The success of Tempus is mainly...
due to its soft convergence approach, it is perceived as beneficial for both sides, and to a certain extent is able to avoid apparent asymmetrical relationships. Nonetheless, although EU higher education programmes may be effectively applied, the actual projection of soft power may not have the desired impact in practice, nor expand its influence to other strategic sectors.

The Tempus Programme, in particular, is a major example of the EU using higher education as a resource of soft power. The analysis presented in this paper reveals that the EU is not only aware of the importance of higher education as a tool of wielding soft power, but is also making effective use of it and is ready to increase investments in this resource. The Tempus Programme has become an appealing cooperation device from which all participating institutions, both from EU and non-EU countries, benefit. All Tempus projects are designed to meet the national priorities of the recipient countries, but also to push forward the higher education reforms promoted by Bologna, and the foreign policy agenda of the EU. The accomplishments of programmes like Tempus have created a European brand at the international level with a tremendous strategic impact, which each Member State would have been unlikely to reach alone.

The epistemic community of Bologna and Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) has become an important knowledge bank for the modernisation of universities, and therefore a major source of soft power at the service of the EU. HEREs from Tempus countries are highly exposed to repeated messages about how Bologna reforms are modernising the European higher education landscape. They are encouraged to invite European experts financed with EU funds to spread the Bologna message, to organise events in their countries aiming to promote EU reforms, and to share what they learn in Europe with their decision-makers. Following the terminology used by Nye (2004), this kind of approach does not simply persuade, it co-opts and empowers individuals to believe in the importance of their mission. They are not only ready to receive the message, but also to spread it in their countries of origin. Since many of them have direct contacts with decision-makers, the expected effect is more likely to succeed, to provoke attraction, and ultimately acquiescence.

As the officer from the European Commission interviewed for this paper mentioned, “[…] both programmes and policies [under Tempus] have had a positive influence in the [neighbouring] countries, and the other way round. We have learnt much more about their people. If we know how they are educated, about their culture, we get to know a little bit more about their souls and what makes them tick. That is important because on issues like trade, or other very dry sectors, we do not actually get to know about the fabric of their society, just what they do or produce. And this is not enough to enter in collaboration with other peoples”. “By looking to the outside we can not only learn, but we also show a responsiveness to the needs of the rest of the world” (Campbell, 2006, 7, 4), and therefore, we will be more equipped to compete globally.

Although this research has presented some answers, it has also opened other avenues of inquiry. Further research on aspects such as the soft power wielded by international university ranking systems, the commercial potential of European higher education reforms to project soft power, the impact of the EU higher education policy on other policy fields, or the analysis of EU influence in this field in other Tempus countries or through other programmes could definitely provide valuable complementary findings. A deeper analysis of the mechanisms used by other developed economies to exert soft power through higher education and their effective impact could also assist in assessing the level of success attained through the
approach embraced by the EU. The future of the Tempus actions under Erasmus+, or the impact caused by the substantial ongoing cutbacks in higher education budgets in many EU Member States will, likewise, open other research possibilities. Another aspect to analyse in detail is whether European higher education reforms influence certain academic domains more than others.

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