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Europeanisation agenda and membership in the European Higher Education Area post-2020: stakeholders' perspectives from the UK and Germany

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Abstract

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an international project for the harmonisation of higher education (HE) systems through the Bologna Process action lines. This presentation is a two-case-study extract (UK and Germany) from a larger four-case-study project, which focuses on the four founders of the EHEA: the UK, Germany, France and Italy. The presentation draws on the rational-choice neo-institutionalist approach to differentiated Europeanisation and a thematic analysis of the interviews with key stakeholders in the two countries, supplemented by the analysis of their official communications. The overarching project about the four EHEA founders aims to make an essential contribution to the scholarship about the EHEA by advancing our limited knowledge about its initiators and their Europeanisation post-2020. Revealing the trends specifically from the UK and Germany is significant and timely for theorising their differentiated Europeanisation and informing EHEA international policy-making in the run-up to its 2030 deadline.

Full paper

RATIONALE

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is an international

project for the harmonisation of higher education (HE) systems through the Bologna Process action lines. 2020 was the deadline for achieving a fully-functioning EHEA and organising further work. The EHEA has, arguably, emerged as a platform for Europeanisation, particularly after the adoption in 2001 of the goal for the EU to become “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world”, which followed Lisbon Council in 2000 when this goal was originally set specifically for the EU (Corbett, 2011: 36).

This conference presentation is a two-case-study extract (UK and Germany) from a larger four-case-study project, which focuses on the four founders of the EHEA: the UK, Germany, France and Italy. The project adopts the rational-choice neo-institutionalist approach to differentiated Europeanisation (Graziano and Vink, 2017) and applies it to the analysis of EHEA membership and its associated Europeanisation.

Growing differentiated Europeanisation is the most commonly discussed form of Europeanisation since a while ago (Stubb, 1996). This concept has already been applied to the analysis of the EHEA which spreads beyond the EU. Veiga et al (2015) applied it, but only in the area of HE harmonisation and only in the context of Germany, Italy, Norway and Portugal. Even though Germany and Italy featured in that study, it did not answer the questions posed by my project. This is because the scholars relied only on the analysis of countries' Bologna reports before 2009, did not review the situation post-2020, did not offer an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of HE actors on the EHEA membership and did not view it as a case of their wider Europeanisation. There is a range of single-country studies or collective case studies that incorporated only some countries of my interest in the EHEA context. Most earlier studies focus on Bologna implementation implications and the process of relevant reforms (e.g, Field, 2005; Guth, 2006). The foci of recent studies are more varied, such as in Marquand and Scott (2018) about the difference of enthusiasm for Bologna action lines in UK devolved governments, or Turner (2019: 515) – about Bologna being a trigger for altering the ‘function and status that the former classical German university enjoyed’. However, Europeanisation resulting from the EHEA membership is not the prime focus of these studies.

METHODOLOGY

While literature about the participation of the UK, Germany, France and Italy in the EHEA is diverse, no research explores them jointly as the EHEA founders. The originality of this project lies in addressing this gap by investigating:

1. What are the perspectives of key HE actors in the founding countries of the EHEA (UK and Germany only to be presented in the conference) on the significance of their membership in this Area for them post-2020?
2. How does this inform our understanding of the wider Europeanisation agenda of the four countries?

BERA (2018) ethical guidelines were followed in the design of this qualitative collective case-study project. While a degree of comparison is assumed here, it is not a comparative study per se, but rather a study aimed at gaining a full account of the issue in multiple cases (Stake, 1994).

The UK case study has been completed and the other three case studies are in progress. Data analysis for Germany will finish before the conference.

Data collection in this project relies on elite interviews with key stakeholders in the four countries as the main data source, supplemented by the collection of relevant official communications from their websites. Online (Ms Teams) semi-structured in-depth interviews rely on a non-probability opportunistic/snowball sample of at least six participants from each country, targeting representatives from key HE actors listed on the EHEA website for the four countries (EHEA, 2022). These stakeholders' official communications about Bologna post-2020 are collected by searching their websites using the keywords 'Bologna', 'European Higher Education Area' and 'EHEA'.

The interviews are transcribed and analysed thematically in NVivo,

along with the official communications. The analysis follows Rubin and Rubin's (2012) guide for open and axial coding of themes.

SIGNIFICANCE

The overarching project about the four founding countries of the EHEA aims to make an essential contribution to the scholarship about the EHEA by advancing our limited knowledge about its initiators and their Europeanisation in the post-2020 era. Revealing the trends specifically from the UK and Germany is also significant and timely for theorising differentiated Europeanisation from HE perspective and informing EHEA international level policy-making in the run-up to its new deadline of 2030.

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