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Original Article

A Path Dependence Approach to Understanding Educational Policy Harmonisation: The Qualifications Framework in The European Higher Education Area

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This paper examines the development of a system of easily readable and comparable qualifications within a single Qualifications Framework in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) as part of the Bologna process. Employing a path dependence approach, combined with new understandings of critical junctures and incremental policy change, as our conceptual lens, we find that multiple self-reinforcing events between the 1998 Sorbonne Declaration and the 2005 Bergen Communiqué, in the form of Declarations and Communiqués, guided implementation of the Bologna policy process, along with elements of incremental layering. We also see evidence that policy formation and implementation are self-reinforcing in the context of the development of the QF-EHEA.

Keywords: QF-EHEA; Bologna process; education policy; policy formation and implementation; path dependence

Introduction

In this paper, we examine a part of the Bologna Process, specifically the development of a single Qualifications Framework in the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA) – which sought the adoption of a harmonised system of easily readable and comparable degrees – using a path dependence lens that draws upon new understandings of the critical junctures concept and incremental policy change. The QF-EHEA is a meta-framework designed to facilitate the comparison of qualifications across national boundaries (Feeney and Horan, 2015). It has eight levels of qualifications, each with designated learning outcomes. Within this context, each nation can formulate their unique national level framework of qualifications and map it to the QF-EHEA. Different nations can use this as a reference point to clarify issues

of comparability of national level qualifications. The aim of the QF-EHEA is to have a system to compare qualifications in order to boost education quality within Europe to make universities more effective in the knowledge-based economy which is seen as essential to economic growth (Corbett, 2005).

'The Bologna Process is an intergovernmental commitment to restructuring higher education systems which extends far beyond the EU' (Keeling, 2006, 203). It was 'created and developed outside the institutional framework of the European Union (EU)' (Ravinet, 2008, 354). This makes it a fascinating process (see Corbett, 2005; Gürüz, 2011; Hackl, 2011; Racké, 2007; Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010; Feeney, 2014) and may indicate how other broad policy harmonisations may evolve. We illustrate the emergence of policy harmonisation as the initiating declaration was supported by subsequent declarations and communiqués, with a focus on the QF-EHEA. Using a path dependence approach allows us to grips with the temporality of the process and gain an understanding of the nature of policy change in European higher education since the late 1990s.

We begin with a review of the literature on path dependence. We then identify and analyse the key education policy developments between 1998 and 2005, focusing on the QF-EHEA in the context of the Bologna Process. We employ a constructivist approach in order to interpret and understand the outcomes which were created and agreed as part of the Bologna Process. The source material for this study includes documentary sources, which comprise the declarations and communiqués that were published and disseminated from 1999 through to 2005. We highlight the importance of abstract ideas and their connection to policy change. The paper concludes with some thoughts on how the path dependence approach can help us to understand the evolution of the QF-EHEA.

Path Dependence Theory

The central tenet of historical institutionalism is that choices made when a policy is initiated will have a persistent influence – hence path dependence (Peters, 1999, 210). This concept borrows from economic history (see Arthur, 1994; David, 1985). When a government's initiative starts on a path, there is an inertial tendency for the initial policy choices to persist. According to Hacker (2002, 54) 'path dependence refers to developmental trajectories that are inherently difficult to reverse'. In general, 'a process is path dependent if initial moves in one direction elicit further moves in that same direction' (Kay, 2005, 553). This approach points to the significance of past decisions for the structuring of political activity and future policy outcomes (Jovanovic and Lynggaard, 2014).

'Path dependency is an appealing concept for understanding public policy development' in terms of explaining not only why policies might be difficult to reform, but why they may become more complex over time, emphasising temporality

in political processes (Kay, 2005, 558). By employing a path dependence perspective to study the development of the QF-EHEA, permitting us to see how policy objectives are reinforced and elucidated through a process of periodic clarification and development, we are trying to provide a more historically informed understanding of higher education policy evolution.

In the best historical institutionalist scholarship, path dependence refers to the dynamics of increasing returns, self-reinforcing, or positive feedback, processes – what economists call sunk costs (Pierson, 2000). Outcomes at a formative moment trigger feedback mechanism that reinforces the recurrence of a particular pattern. Path dependency means history matters (North, 1990). We cannot understand today’s policy choices and changes without tracing their evolution through time.

Mahoney (2000) argues that there are two types of path-dependent sequences; *self-reinforcing* and *reactive*. Self-reinforcing sequences see a policy pattern, once adopted, delivering increasing benefits over time with continued adoption, proving difficult to change. Reactive sequences regard each event as a reaction to a prior event. We are interested in self-reinforcing sequences. For Mahoney (2000), path-dependent analyses have three features: (1) the study of causal processes is particularly sensitive to events early in a sequence; (2) these events are contingent occurrences which cannot be explained by prior events or conditions; and (3) sequences are relatively deterministic causal patterns (Figure 1).

Traditionally, with path dependence, the cost of reversing a policy becomes increasingly high, despite the existence of choice points (Pierson, 2000). Policies, once initiated, would be seen to continue along until a sufficiently strong force deflects them (Krasner, 1984, 240). Hence, the traditional importance placed by path dependence on critical junctures in explaining change.

To address the problems of infinite regress associated with explaining causation in the context of path dependence (Pierson, 2004), Slater and Simmons (2010)

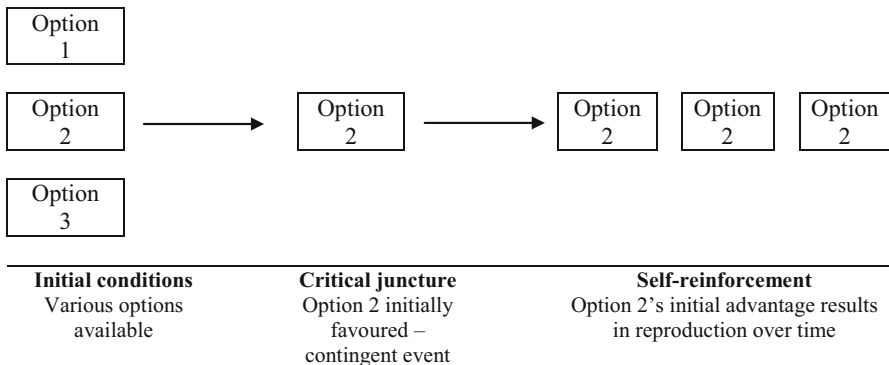


Figure 1. Illustration of contingency in self-reinforcing sequence.
 Source: Mahoney (2000).

sought to identify the main casual factors in political development. They focused on antecedent conditions and particularly critical antecedents that occurred prior to and caused critical junctures, while not denying contingency and agency (Capoccia, 2015). These are different from Mahoney's (2000) initial ruptures solution to infinite regress. Critical antecedents are "conditions preceding a critical juncture that combine in a causal sequence with factors operating during that juncture to produce a divergent outcome" (Slater and Simmons, 2010, 889).

Additionally, what Soifer (2012, 1574) refers to as permissive conditions – factors that change 'the underlying context to increase the causal power of agency or contingency and thus the prospect for divergence' – are crucial. These permissive conditions represent the easing of constraints and make change possible. For (Soifer, 2012, 1573), a critical juncture 'is marked by the emergence and disappearance of permissive conditions'. Permissive conditions bound the productive conditions that result in critical junctures.

Critical junctures result in the adoption of a particular arrangement from among alternatives. Thereafter, the pathway established funnels units in that direction (Mahoney, 2003, 53). For many writers, a critical juncture is a swift development that has an enduring and significant impact that is contingent (see Hogan, 2006; Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007; Hogan and Doyle, 2007; Mahoney, 2000; and Soifer, 2012). 'In a contingent path dependent sequence the turning point renders the occurrence of each subsequent point more likely until, finally, 'lock in' occurs' (Howlett, 2009, 249).

Hogan and Doyle (2007) employ interests, ideas and agency as the productive conditions that shape the outcome of a critical juncture, wherein variation results from choices and discourses. They argue that after a crisis (or what Valenzuela and Valenzuela (1981) would call the generative cleavage), ideational change, involving policy entrepreneurs and their interests, is crucial for radical policy change. Once a new idea is adopted "policymaking becomes possible only in terms of these ideas" (Blyth, 2001, 4). It is from historical institutionalism, with its focus on path dependence and punctuations to explain change, that discursive institutionalism evolved (Hay, 2006). Cox (2001, 471) advocated using this constructivist perspective to expand our understanding of the path dependence approach.

Additionally, outside of rare ruptures, policies may develop in a more incremental manner. Such 'non-punctuated' changes can deliver transformative change. Policies can be viewed as changing incrementally through the concept of layering (Streeck and Thelen, 2005, 1). This involves "the grafting of new elements onto an otherwise stable institutional framework" (Thelen, 2004, 35). 'Existing empirical evidence shows that many policy regimes or mixes have developed haphazardly through processes of policy layering' (Kern and Howlett, 2009, 395). According to this perspective, policies must be actively maintained; otherwise, gradual change takes hold (Hacker, 2005). As March and Olsen (2005, 15) write: 'the assumption that institutional structures persist unless there are external shocks, underestimates both intra- and inter-institutional dynamics and sources of change'. Thus, in addition to

incorporating recent developments in the theory behind critical junctures, the path dependence approach we use incorporates elements of incremental change along with elements of discursive institutionalism and the role of ideas and agency.

This reconceptualisation of path dependence recognises that policies may, over time, be subject to punctuated and non-punctuated changes, and be catalysed by endogenous, as well as exogenous, factors (Kay, 2005, 559–560). It is this reconceptualised understating of the path dependence process that we use here to understand the development of the QF-EHEA in the context of the broader Bologna Process. In examining the development and acceptance of the QF-EHEA, we use the published declarations and communiqués that constituted such a large part of the broader Bologna Process as the primary materials for our study. We utilised a constructivist approach to this study, which allowed us to use these materials to interpret and understand the development of the QF-EHEA, but not to make any predictions arising from our study. Thus, the document analysis, in the context of our reconceptualised path dependence approach, constitutes a significant part of our research design and provides for a rounded and clear understanding of the process and its nuances that led to the QF-EHEA.

Context: The Emerging Bologna Process

The origin of the Bologna Process and the QF-EHEA can be traced to the Single European Act in 1987 – which we use as the context point. Thus, developing a system of comparability of higher education (HE) qualifications throughout Europe and further afield is not a new concept. Then, in 1988, in Bologna, the universities of Europe came together to sign the *Magna Charta Universitatum* (de Boer and Stensaker, 2007). ‘The charter aired certain fundamental values of the university: academic freedom, the freedom to teach and to learn, and with it, university autonomy’ (Neave, 2003, 142).

The Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community (1991) not only first established this as a principle, but it also showed that higher education, previously accredited a national and cultural role, had become part of the Community’s broader agenda of economic and social coherence (Huisman and van der Wende, 2004, 350). Such policy texts form the way in which we see the world, and lead to a chain of operationalisations that effect the world (Saarinen, 2008, 725). As such, this memorandum constitutes what Slater and Simmons (2010, 889) call a *critical antecedent*, as it precedes the critical juncture, but combines with factors operating during that juncture to result in a different outcome. As Mahoney (2000, 527) warns, ‘without criteria for identifying a meaningful beginning point, the investigator can easily fall into the trap of infinite regress.’

In practical terms, the Memorandum necessitated various stakeholders making judgements about the quality of HE programmes and the quality and comparability

of qualifications between member states, with no apparent criteria or information to assist, or enable, them to do so (Brennan, 1993, 15). The Maastricht Treaty, by encouraging the academic recognition of diplomas (Maastricht 1992, Article 126), initiated the principle of comparable HE qualifications being adopted by EU member states (Brennan, 1993, 10). For us Maastricht constitutes what Soifer (2012, 1574) calls the *permissive condition* – the factor that changes the underlying context to increase the causal power of contingency and the prospect of divergence for what subsequently comes with Sorbonne and Bologna.

The Sorbonne declaration (1998)

Before the Bologna Process got underway four ministers of higher education (France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom (UK)) signed a declaration that referred to ‘...harmonisation of the architecture of the European higher education system’ (EHEA, 2015). This decision came in response to the growing problem, generative cleavage, of how to recognise higher education qualifications for employability (Racké, 2007).

What Sorbonne created was a vision of objectives and norms for higher education policy. The drive for this declaration came from French minister Claude Allègre, who Corbett (2005, 195) describes as a typical policy entrepreneur, who was dealing with domestic French issues to do with convergence of universities and *grandes écoles* along with the need to adopt a degree structure compatible with international standards. It was Allègre who invited the three other ministers to attend the ceremony to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the University of Paris and sign what has become known as the Sorbonne Declaration.

This Declaration was, by design, outside of any formal EU context and is seen as being, as Pierson (2004) would describe it, the trigger event, for what became the Bologna Process (Witte, 2006, 124). ‘It is interesting to note that institutions of higher education did not initiate the Bologna Process’ (Gürüz, 2011, 184). In fact, Corbett (2005, 203) refers to the Bologna Process as ‘policy making in higher education through partnership with state actors and with non-state actors based on cooperation rather than legislation’. As such, when Sorbonne came along it was a quite unexpected development (Karran and Lofgren, 2010; van der Wende, 2000).

Sorbonne served to ostensibly narrow the focus on and of policy formation. It begins a process that has seen the development of a system of easily comparable qualifications within a single framework in higher education across the EU and further afield. Thus, the Bologna Process was a consequence of the contingent event that was the Sorbonne Declaration. In this case ‘contingency refers to the inability of theory to predict or explain, either deterministically or probabilistically, the occurrence of a specific outcome’ (Mahoney, 2000, 512). This Declaration marks a clear critical juncture according to the definitions and criteria set out above - in that it was a swift development, and has had an enduring and significant impact

that was contingent. Also, the duration of the Declaration was brief relative to that of the process it instigated (Hogan and Cavatorta, 2013).

All four ministers, acting as policy entrepreneurs (in the sense that they were thinking “outside the box” (see Hogan and Feeney, 2012)), and through discursive interaction, focused on the knowledge economy and knowledge society as the policy imaginary wherein higher education plays a particular role (Fairclough and Wodak, 2008). This transformed the idea of a single, comparable framework of higher education qualifications into an agreed policy process (Carstensen, 2011). Building on discussions of a general system, which acknowledged cycles of at least three years, the Sorbonne Declaration committed signatories to ‘... a system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognised for international comparison and equivalence’ (EHEA, 2015). ‘It was only because they were national ministers that [they]... introduced the biggest novelty in European higher education policy for 50 years, and in effect, the glue which would hold the Bologna process together’ (Corbett, 2005, 196). As Blyth (2001) points out, subsequent policy making is defined in terms of these developments and ideas.

The Bologna declaration (1999)

Although the call from Sorbonne was heard, it was ‘not without first provoking strong reactions from ministers of ‘small’ EU Member States who did not appreciate Germany, France, Italy and the UK imposing their model’ (Ravinet, 2006). There was a sense that the Sorbonne initiative was a “diktat” of the four major EU powers’ (Ravinet, 2008, 358). As ‘some other ministers did not want to sign a document they had not helped to formulate’, a new declaration was drawn up (Witte *et al.*, 2009, 207).

On 19th June 1999, the Declaration on a ‘European Space for HE’ was signed by 29 ministers of education in Bologna. This declaration was a reinforcement and recommitment to the vision set out in Sorbonne (Ravinet, 2008). In fact, ‘the content of the Bologna declaration came very close to that of the Sorbonne text’ (Witte *et al.*, 2009). Nevertheless, it must be recognised that while the Bologna process has had a long and rich prehistory that extends far beyond the Sorbonne declaration, reaching back into not only the values and traditions of European universities, but also their administrative practices and regimes (Scott, 2012); the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations ‘were purely intergovernmental actions’ (Beerrens, 2008, 407). As Corbett (2005, 7) points out the Bologna process is explicitly underpinned by the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

Bologna constitutes a commitment by each signatory to reform the structures of their national HE systems in a convergent way, whilst at the same time recognising the fundamental principles of autonomy and diversity for HE in each state (Olsen and Maassen, 2007). This committed signatories to develop a common ‘architecture’ for degrees and the promotion of European co-operation with a view to

developing comparable criteria. The barriers that had kept the European systems largely isolated from one another were giving way. This implied profound adjustments to several aspects of each countries' higher education systems' architecture (Witte *et al.*, 2008). As Corbett (2005) points out, this process was Europe's answer to how to create a knowledge society in the face of demographic change and the impact of globalisation.

The Bologna Declaration formulated a set of broad aims, including constructing a 'European HE Area', to 'promote citizens' mobility and employability and the Continent's overall development' (www.Magna-carta.org 2015; Bologna Declaration, 1999, 1–2). Thus, 'one of the main aims of the Bologna Declaration [was] to improve the international competitiveness of European higher education degrees and qualifications by introducing in each country a two cycle (undergraduate-graduate) system' (van Vught *et al.*, 2002, 108). The harmonisation of higher education systems was not the aim of Bologna, but a means to an end (Karran and Lofgren, 2010; Zhao and Wildemeersch, 2007). To meet these objectives, the Bologna Declaration affirmed the intention of all signatories to 'engage in co-ordinating our policies to reach... within the first decade of the third millennium a range of objectives, which have particular relevance to the establishment of a European area of HE' (Bologna Declaration, 1999, 3). A total of six objectives, to be completed by all signatories by 2010, were presented (see Table 1 below). For the sheer variety of the different systems ostensibly willing to be committed to a single purpose, the Bologna Process is the most significant reform to have taken place in the 900-year history of the university in Europe (Neave and Maassen, 2007, 139). However, it must be recognised that, the declaration does not bind the signatory countries (Huisman and van der Wende, 2004).

Table 1 The objectives of the Bologna Declaration (1999)

Objective #1	Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees in order to promote European citizens employability and the international competitiveness of the European HE system
Objective #2	Adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate
Objective #3	Establishment of a system of credits – such as in the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System ECTS
Objective #4	Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement
Objective #5	Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies
Objective #6	Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in HE, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research

Note: Bold text as per original document; *Source:* Bologna Declaration (1999), 3–4.

The first objective, a QF-EHEA, is the focus of this study, as it refers to the need to ‘adopt a system of easily readable and comparable degrees’ to promote European citizen’s employability and the international competitiveness of the European HE system (Bold text per original (see Table 1); Bologna Declaration, 1999, 3–4). This objective is of particular importance given its primary role in the Bologna Process. Without meeting this objective of the QF-EHEA, the overall process would be understood to fail.

This reform agenda would be implemented in a decentralised manner at the state level, but it would be closely monitored by European-level reports, conferences, communiqués and policy declarations, which are all structured around a series of biennial ministerial meetings (Keeling, 2006). The bi-annual communiqués, arising from these meetings, were produced in the hope of providing guidance towards implementation. We understand these as self-reinforcing sequences, furthering the implementation of the Bologna Process. This influences how the signatories understood the Bologna objectives, and specifically the goal of harmonising qualifications towards an agreed QF-EHEA. Countries interpreted and implemented elements of the Bologna reform agenda differently due to their cultures, languages, education systems, and university autonomy – the critical antecedents that lead to divergent outcomes (Slater and Simmons, 2010). This reflected various perceptions of the meaning of a common European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and specifically the harmonising actions to be taken to implement a system of easily readable/comparable degrees.

Leaving the interpretation of the goals and the choice of means to the participating countries is an essential characteristic of a voluntary international policy process (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010; Witte, 2008). The result is that the Bologna reforms have been accepted (often – but not universally – rather passively) in many countries (Middlehurst and Teixeira, 2012). Thus, the implementation of the Bologna reforms may not correspond exactly to what reformers intended, as countries that defined the objectives of the process hold different values and visions that are only rhetorically reconciled in the declarations and communiqués (Hackl, 2012). The result created a self-reinforcing sequence that solidified a variety of lock-in objectives, each with their own complexities. As Howlett (2009, 248) points out ‘lock-in in this model is due to the key role played by positive feedback to policy actors in which there are increasing returns available to those who follow an emerging trajectory’.

The Prague Communiqué (2001)

The Prague Communiqué (2001) confirmed the six original objectives of the Bologna Declaration (see Table 1), whilst highlighting progress made. Three objectives were added relating to lifelong learning, HE institutions and students, and promoting the attractiveness of the EHEA (see Table 2 below) (Witte *et al.*,

Table 2 Events relating to objective 1 of the Bologna Declaration – a system of easily readable and comparable degrees (the QF-EHEA)

<i>Year</i>	<i>Treaties & Legislative Instruments</i>	<i>Policy development</i>
1987	Single European Act	Establishing initial conditions – Context Point Facilitating the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital
1988	Magna Charta Universitatum	Signed in Bologna by 388 rectors and heads of universities; principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as a guideline for good governance and self-understanding of universities
1991	Memorandum on Higher Education (HE) in the European Union (EU)	A more open and accessible European market for HE.
1991	European Council Directive	Critical antecedent A general system for the mutual recognition of qualifications of HE diplomas. Cycles of at least three years referred to as a loose criterion
1992	The Maastricht Treaty	Permissive Conditions (window of opportunity) Freedom to trade and offer services across national boundaries
1998	Sorbonne Declaration	Critical juncture – the contingent event <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A harmonisation of HE architecture • A narrowing of focus around two main cycles (undergraduate and graduate) to be recognised for international comparison and equivalence
1999	Bologna Declaration	Self-reinforcing sequence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 explicit objectives put into place to guide implementation. Here we see clear action paths to clarify the understanding of the Bologna Process (See Table 1) • Guidance without prescription
2001	Prague Communiqué	Self-reinforcing sequence (objectives of Sorbonne Declaration and Bologna Declaration reproduced) that is being deepened incrementally through layering <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 explicit objectives confirmed • 3 additional objectives in relation to lifelong learning, HE institutions and students and promotion of the European HE Area (EHEA) Resources added with establishment of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)
2003	Berlin Communiqué	Self-reinforcing sequence (objectives of Sorbonne Declaration, Bologna Declaration and Prague Communiqué reproduced and expanded incrementally through further layering) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference made to need for a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications which describes qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile

Table 2 *continued*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Treaties & Legislative Instruments</i>	<i>Policy development</i>
2004	Dublin Descriptors	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tighter guidance of the abstract understanding around “learning outcomes” and “competence” to establish comparability – closer to policy implementation (moving from policy formation/formulation)
2004	Dublin Descriptors	Tighter guidance of the abstract understanding around “learning outcomes” and “competence” to establish comparability – closer to policy implementation (moving from policy formation/formulation)
2005	Bergen Communiqué	Self-reinforcing sequence (objectives of Sorbonne Declaration, Bologna Declaration, Prague Communiqué and Berlin Communiqué reproduced and expanded incrementally through further layering) <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Adopted overall framework for qualifications in the EHEA (the FQ -EHEA)• Commitment to elaborate national frameworks for qualifications for compatibility with the QF- EHEA by 2010

Sources: Prague Communiqué (2001), Berlin Communiqué (2003), Bergen Communiqué (2005), EHEA (2015) and (Magna-carta.org 2015).

2009). These developments highlight the self-reinforcing sequence at work, as well as policy layering.

Concerning the first Bologna objective, a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, the ministers encouraged higher education institutions to take advantage of existing legislation to meet this. They called upon organisations and networks, such as National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) and European Network of Information Centres (ENIC), to assist in promoting simple, equitable and transparent recognition criteria for comparison purposes. Committing themselves to continuing the Bologna Process, the follow-up meeting, in Berlin in 2003, would review progress and establish new priorities. It was decided that there should be a formalised system of continuity between the conferences, and to this end, a Bologna follow-up group (BFUG) was established (Corbett, 2005). This would be responsible for the future development of the process, as well as having a monitoring role.

The period between the Prague and Berlin conferences proved busy for the newly established BFUG with numerous seminars, studies and position papers being developed (Witte, 2006, 137). These seminars ‘developed into a unique pan-European forum, which reflects the ‘snowball effect’ of the Bologna Process’ (Zgaga, 2003, 8). Many of the signatories of the Declaration began implementing significant reforms in their national HE systems.

Berlin Communiqué (2003)

Ministers of education from 33 countries met in Berlin in September 2003, for the '*Realising the European HE Area*' Conference. In addition, seven new countries were admitted, meaning 40 countries had committed to achieving the outcomes of Bologna (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, 8).

The Berlin Communiqué refers to the need of an overarching framework of qualifications for the EHEA which should describe 'qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile' (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, 4). The Berlin Communiqué outlined a work programme for the BFUG for 2003–2005, which included a monitoring role for the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) project on quality assurance.

Following the conference, the BFUG established a working group in March 2004, to carry out an evaluation study (Reinalda and Kulesza, 2005) regarding progress by individual countries in meeting the Bologna objectives. The study was based on information from Eurydice (2005) and national reports. This process reviewed variations in implementations, as well as issues of particular importance to each signatory, reflecting their interpretation of the importance of specific tasks (Corbett, 2005). The variations in tasks and activities required to meet multiple understandings of ideal goals, in the face of actual outcomes, illustrate the self-reinforcing nature of policy formulation (see Table 2) followed by implementation (Mahoney, 2000; Pierson, 2000).

Given the flurry of activity between the Prague and Berlin meetings, it was agreed that there would be a two-year action plan to integrate progress up to that point. Intermediate priorities were identified for action in relation to quality assurance; degree structure; the adoption of a system based on two main cycles and the promotion of mobility. The emergence of 'intermediate objectives' within the two-year cycles of the Bologna Process suggested a more fine-tuned approach to implementation, as operational aspects could be considered within a broader agreed framework of understanding. All of this highlights the self-reinforcing nature of processes at work in Bologna.

Dublin descriptors (2004)

Following the Berlin Communiqué, Denmark and Ireland developed national level frameworks of qualifications for their higher education qualifications. The issue of creating an overarching framework of qualifications was the focus of a 'Joint Quality Initiative informal group' which met in Dublin in October 2004. This informal group comprised representatives from national and European agencies, including the European Universities' Association, the Belgian Ministry of Education, the UK Quality Assurance Agency, the Dutch Ministry of Education, and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

The group focused on ‘an outcomes’ based approach which had been adopted by the Danish and Irish agencies (see Table 2). Previously, the possible approaches for achieving mutual recognition of higher education qualifications, which arguably stymied performances before the release of the Prague Communiqué, left discussions in the realm of policy formation. However, the group agreed a set of Award Descriptors, referred to as the ‘Dublin Descriptors’, to clarify the outcomes that should be considered for each type of award. This brought closer to implementation an agreed framework of comparable and compatible qualifications, the QF-EHEA. This framework of descriptors provided a mechanism to recognise national competencies, whilst allowing for the diversity of cultures, languages and national education systems as mentioned in the Bologna Declaration.

Bergen Communiqué (2005)

The ministers met again in Bergen in May 2005, for the conference titled ‘The European HE Area – Achieving the Goals’. Five new participating countries joined the process, bringing the total to 45. A mid-term review of the Bologna Process was conducted to help set ‘goals and priorities towards 2010’ (Bergen Communiqué, 2005, 1).

This conference adopted the ‘overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA’ and recognised that the framework was focused on ‘learning outcomes and competences’ (Bergen Communiqué, 2005, 2). The FQ-EHEA represents a single approach/benchmark against which national level frameworks would be compared and measured, based on the understanding of comparability within a two-cycle formation of undergraduate and graduate degrees, and a focus on an outcome- and competence-based approach. These competencies could be traced back to a ‘competences’-based approach adopted in Berlin. The ministers committed themselves to ‘elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010’ (see Table 2) (Bergen Communiqué, 2005, 2). Multiple cycles of self-reinforcement were clearly in evidence now, with this stage reinforcing the objectives set out in each of the previous stages.

Findings and Discussion

Preceded by a critical antecedent (Memorandum on Higher Education in the European Community (1991), permissive conditions (Maastricht Treaty) and a critical juncture (Sorbonne), the Bologna Process saw a bi-annual series of communiqués initiated – a path-dependent self-reinforcing sequence – due to the significance of repetition built into the process. Sorbonne shows ‘how governments want to use Europe to introduce domestic reform’ (Corbett, 2004, 12). In Bologna repeated patterns of actions involving multiple actors in discursive interaction – as policy processes are discursive, or persuasive by nature (Saarinen, 2005, 190) – refining and developing a common understanding of harmonisation, began to

appear. Here we see a policy formation/implementation process and its formalisation with regular patterns of actions, as evidenced by meetings such as those resulting in the Dublin Descriptors and the allocation of resources to the BFUG to monitor progress. The goal of adopting the QF-EHEA in 2005 (Objective #1, Table 1) became attainable as multiple understandings begin to converge from 1998. Convergence is clearly the Bologna Declaration's "and the ensuing process's leitmotiv" (Witte, 2008, 83). The development of the QF-EHEA has resulted in the creation of the most sophisticated regional higher education system (Chao, 2014). Six cycles of policy formation coincided with policy implementation (see Table 2).

The Bologna Process illustrates the self-reinforcing nature of policy formation and implementation toward harmonising standards in the QF-EHEA. 'Discourses – policy texts in policy contexts – are a part of the process leading to these actions. Policy discourse describes, conceptualises and creates actions in the world' (Saarinen, 2008, 725). The portfolio of policy objectives in Table 1 provided the parameters for meeting the first Bologna objective with the understanding that cycles should last at least three years (European Commission, 1991) and a more focused conceptualisation of harmonisation in the context of two main cycles, as accepted in the Sorbonne Declaration (1998). The understandings of multiple actors would be guided without being prescribed (Table 2).

From Formation to Implementation: The bi-annual declarations or communiqués, a self-reinforcing sequence, informed by tacit understandings, informed/guided the actors' throughout the process toward the QF-EHEA (Figure 2). The aim of the process was to increase the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education (Corbett, 2004). This sequence is important in relation to the various policy objectives necessary to achieve the QF-EHEA. The abstract nature of the goal of the process remained linked to concepts for framing the formation of policy. As additional communiqués were produced, and more objectives added, the path became more defined, at greater sunk costs. Clearly, policy formation influenced implementation, which drove policy evolution. With each reinforcing sequence, moving towards the harmonisation of a QF-EHEA, we see incremental changes, with policy layering occurring.

In addition to a policy path developing at EU level, there were individual paths in each state. Local implementation, reflecting national/cultural agendas, meant that some policy objectives would result in different local interpretations and/or understandings (Helgøy and Homme, 2015). For instance, the Bologna two cycle structures were not seen as suitable in the medical field, but some countries have implemented this models (e.g. the Netherlands, Switzerland), while systems with a tradition of two cycle structures (e.g. Ireland and the UK) have not (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2010). Implementation is always a process of interpretation and where states, with their unique histories, are responsible for implementation it would be expected there would be a wide spectrum of outcomes (Corbett, 2005). Here we see Slater and Simmons' (2010) national/culture critical antecedents that preceded the critical

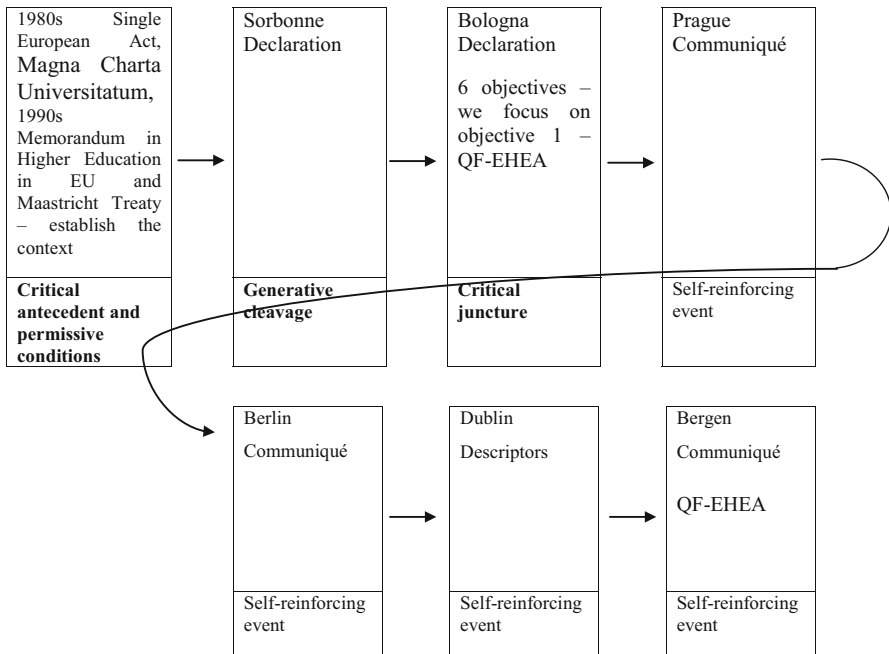


Figure 2. Critical juncture and self-reinforcing path-dependent sequence toward QF-EHEA.

juncture, combining with factors during the juncture to result in divergent outcomes. Some reticence on the part of signatories is evident in the delayed development of national level qualifications and awards frameworks. The lack of clarity around ‘how to implement’ constrained progress toward the broader Bologna objective of a common higher education area. However, the Dublin Descriptors resulted in two pertinent outcomes. Firstly, the ‘outcomes’ based approach enshrined in the Dublin Descriptors clarified, aligned and galvanised the first objective of the Bologna Process – QF-EHEA – a specific policy layering. Secondly, the introduction of an ‘outcomes’ based approach focused attention as a mechanism to achieve a goal. This resulted in ‘sets of possibilities’ being clarified. The outcomes based approach was formally adopted in the Bergen Communiqué (2005) and selectively retained, thereby informing the harmonisation process.

Similarly, the ‘competencies’ approach within the Dublin Descriptors informed and narrowed understandings of how to move toward harmonisation, focusing the policy path. The signatories could now begin to implement meaningful actions to harmonise national educational systems to reflect comparability of degrees with two main cycles. This cumulatively refined the process toward a clear framework deemed acceptable to all signatories.

The Bergen Communiqué reinforces the process begun with the Bologna Declaration's identification of six objectives to be met to create a single EHEA by 2010 (Olsen and Maassen, 2007). The first of these objectives, the QF-EHEA, was adopted and a 'single' accepted approach approved – facilitating the comparison of qualifications undertaken across national boundaries. This permits countries to create their own unique national level frameworks of qualifications and then map these to the QF-EHEA. In this regard the QF-EHEA serves as a meta-framework that different countries can use as a reference point to clarify issues of comparability of national level qualifications.

Conclusion

A notable characteristic of policies, like institutions, is 'that policy decisions accumulate over time; a process of accretion can occur in a policy area that restricts options for future policy-makers' (Kay, 2005, 558). This placing of new constituents on an established institution's framework constitutes policy layering. These decisions can be the result of endogenous, or exogenous, factors, and can occur quickly or slowly. Employing a reconceptualised path dependence approach to examine the Bologna Process provides insights into understanding, in broad terms, the critical antecedent (Magna Charta Universitatum in 1988; Memorandum on Higher Education in 1991), permissive conditions (Maastricht Treaty), critical juncture (Sorbonne Declaration) and self-reinforcing sequences (Bologna Declaration and subsequent bi-annual declarations and communiqués), leading to the implementation of the QF-EHEA at a pan national level, how it is reinforced and layered, and ultimately how it works its way down to state level.

We see that path dependence, when employed with new understandings of critical junctures and incremental policy change, can take account of the continuous variations in the policy process, how policy objectives were refined and ultimately galvanised by the outcomes approach within a two-cycle framework for qualifications. This suggests that path dependence takes account of continuous change by recognising incremental change in the form of gradual layering. Thus, with path dependence, 'the dualism between stability and change can be avoided by considering the sedimentation of policy decisions' (Kay, 2005, 567).

The Bologna Process initiated a period of change and evolution in HE policy in Europe and further afield. The goal to harmonise qualifications across the signatory states, and arrive at a QF-EHEA, was achieved by interdependent actions carried out by actors during phases of policy formulation, followed by implementation. This was reinforced by the declarations and communiqués, thereby ensuring the goal remained a priority. The result was action plans being specified and priorities listed so that the interdependent activities among the signatories were consistent with the broader goal of creating a single higher education area (HEA) in Europe.

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