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Regional policy coordination and policy convergence in higher education

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This paper summarizes the key elements of a monograph (hopefully) forthcoming in early 2018 within Springer's Higher Education Dynamics book series. This paper is in essence a "test run" for what will became the concluding chapter in the monograph, reflecting on the key contributions of the study. For this reason, the theoretical framework is only outlined here (without an elaborate literature review) and the research design does not include a very detailed rationale for the choice of cases. Similarly, the empirical material on the four regions is essentially an extremely brief summary of four distinct chapters in the book. These are all included as foundation for the final section in which we reflect on the conceptual contributions of the study and discuss implications thereof for further studies, not only concerning higher education, but other knowledge intensive sectors as well.

Introduction

European higher education policy arena is an exceptional multi-level governance context (Piattoni, 2010), comprising at least four distinct levels: (1) organizational (higher education institutions, e.g. universities), (2) national (in most cases corresponding to entire higher education systems), (3) regional (clusters of countries within Europe), and (4) European. While there are studies which focus on similarities and differences between countries with cultural, economic and political similarities (e.g. Branković, Kovačević, Maassen, Stensaker, & Vukasovic, 2014; Christensen, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2014; Dobbins & Khachatryan, 2014; Dobbins & Knill, 2009; Vukasovic & Elken, 2013; Vukasovic & Huisman, 2017; Zgaga et al., 2013), a more systematic comparison of the extent of policy coordination and convergence within European regions and the relationship between the regional and European level policy dynamics has been lacking.

With this in mind, the current study focuses in particular on four distinct regions in Europe – Balkans (former Yugoslavia + Albania), Baltics (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), Benelux (Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands) and the Nordics (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden) – and analyses approaches to and outcomes of policy coordination within these regions as well as in relation to the overarching policy coordination in the Europe of Knowledge. The research questions guiding the overall study are: What are the similarities and differences in how policy coordination in higher education is organized in these four regions? What is the extent of policy convergence within these regions and between these regions and the European level? What is the relationship between how policy coordination is organized and the extent of policy convergence and what are its implications for the overall multi-level policy dynamics within Europe? This paper specifically focuses on the implications of these three questions by reflecting on current analytical tools for conceptualising policy convergence and coordination.

The theoretical framework builds on the literature on policy coordination, policy convergence and policy transfer, both concerning higher education and other public sectors. The four case studies build on policy documents and secondary sources, sometimes complemented with interviews with policy actors. This paper will first briefly outline the theoretical framework, and then present the research design, focusing in particular on rationales and approaches to cross-case comparison. This will be followed by descriptions of policy coordination and convergence in the four regions individually and comparison between them. The final section will provide a critical appraisal of the conceptual approach, primarily with regards to how it contributes to research on policy convergence and coordination in general and in higher education in particular. Based on this, possible avenues for further research will be discussed.

Theoretical framework

Expanding the multi-levelness of governance – adding the regional level

That governance of higher education, or knowledge policies more generally, encompasses several governance levels is now a well-established fact (Chou, Jungblut, Ravinet, & Vukasovic, 2017). In the European context this multi-levelness has been primarily researched in terms policy coordination at national and European levels, the resulting horizontal and vertical tensions (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014) and overlapping policy arenas of varied political saliency (Vukasovic, Jungblut, & Elken, 2017). It is now necessary to explore whether and how policy coordination on the regional level matters, in particular in relation to the European level initiatives.

In the context of this study, governance on the regional level concerns policy processes involving two or more countries within Europe that have cultural, economic and political similarities. Such similarities are often historically grounded and are a reflection of historical geo-political arrangements, including former empires, federal countries or close alliances. The point of departure here is that history matters (Pierson, 2004) – historical regional connections spanning modern national borders shape contemporary policy processes across governance levels. In other words, the complexity of multi-level governance is underestimated if one does not systematically focus on the regional level as well. Thus, this study specifically explores four European regions – Balkan, Baltic, Benelux and Nordic – all of which can be traced back to prior geo-political arrangements, and all of which have significant cultural, economic and political similarities and/or linkages. Within all these four regions, there is some level of policy coordination in different areas, including higher education.

Policy coordination ('independent variable'), transfer and learning ('mechanism')

Policy coordination is often considered to be an *"ill-defined and ambiguous concept. Sometimes it is equated with any form of cooperation, at other times it is defined narrowly as central control."* (Metcalfe, 1994, p. 271). Review of literature using policy coordination as its central concept reveals two, at the first glance, distinct uses.

First, it is used to describe approaches to and outcomes of cooperation between different actors within one government, such as ministries, agencies or central government offices (Boston, 1992; Bouckaert, Peters, & Verhoest, 2010; Braun, 2008; Painter, 1981; Peters, 1998). In this context, coordination is seen as a response to several inter-related developments – NPM-inspired reforms, participatory turn in governance and decentralization – specifically because these developments did not lead to *"the level of coordination and policy integration that political leaders and citizens alike are demanding*

from the system of government" (Peters, 2006, p. 4). In such literature, the distinction between policy coordination and administrative coordination is made, the former referring to cooperation between different actors during policy formulation, the latter during implementation (Painter, 1981). Scales of co-ordination highlight that cooperation between different actors can include everything from mere communication for the purposes of information exchange to systematically and constantly working together towards a specific common objective (Metcalfe, 1994). Peters suggests that cooperation can also been seen in terms of stages, suggesting a linear development from less to more coordination. He highlights *"four possible levels of coordination, each involving greater integration of policy and therefore representing a greater investment of political capital"* (Peters, 2006, p. 5): (1) negative coordination, (2) positive coordination, (3) policy integration and (4) strategic coordination.

In addition to uses of 'policy coordination' that focus on dynamics within a government, the term also designates a specific type of policy-making activity in various international organizations. This is in particular the case for the EU in which five distinct policy modes are identified: community method, regulatory mode, distributional mode, intensive transgovernmentalism and policy coordination. They differ with regards to degree of centralization, role of EU institutions and Member States, and reflect differences in EU jurisdiction across policy sectors. Policy coordination in this context is characterized by involvement of stakeholders and experts, reliance on systematic comparison that is expected to encourage policy learning and by the European Commission being in the driver's seat (Wallace & Reh, 2015). Reliance on experts and expectations concerning policy learning bring this use of 'policy coordination' also close to the idea of epistemic communities (Haas, 1992) and networks (Jordan & Schout, 2006).

While these two uses of the term differ in their scope – one focusing within government, the other across governments – they are not incommensurable. In both cases it concerns cooperation of actors and, thus, it is possible to use insights from the literature focusing on cooperation within government to explore how cooperation across governments is organized. Therefore, in this study higher education policy coordination represents the sum of intentional and formal decisions of actors of one nation-state to align their higher education policies with another nation state.

The distinction between negative coordination, positive coordination, policy integration, and strategic coordination is also of importance here. Negative coordination concerns minimizing negative effects policies of one nation state may have on the other in areas of mutual concern, e.g. recognition of qualifications necessary for free movement of labour, and implies in effect a bilateral or multilateral non-cooperative game which results in minimal mutual adjustment (Scharpf, 2000). Positive coordination concerns situations in which actors (in this case nation states) decide to cooperate because they expect that such cooperation will lead to a 'win-win' situation for all involved. In such

situations, the nation states continue to develop independently their own policies and programmes with their own goals, but also agree to cooperate in the delivery of some services related to these policies, e.g. joint student mobility programmes (Peters, 2006). Positive and negative coordination require cooperation of administrative side of government only, and concerns communication to ensure that policy instruments – 'the how' – are compatible. Policy integration takes coordination one step further and focuses on 'the why'; it concerns active and explicit activities to make the policy goals of different nation states compatible. Finally, strategic coordination comprises all of the previous steps, as well as *"common visions and strategies for the future"* (Braun, 2008, p. 231). The Open Method of Coordination in the area of higher education is an example of a policy coordination process that is moving from policy integration closer and closer to strategic coordination. It comprises common targets and benchmarks that each country needs to achieve, e.g. in terms of higher education attainment, but with freedom to determine how such targets will be achieved. These targets and benchmarks are also infused with strategic importance, being embedded in an overarching vision for the mid- and long-term as formulated in, for example, EU's strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth (European Commission, 2010).

Coordination requires communication between the relevant actors, most limited in the case of negative coordination, and most encompassing in the case of strategic coordination. Moreover, already in the case of negative coordination there needs to be some sharing of knowledge about specific policies and administrative arrangements between the nation states, in order to identify their possible consequences. Effectively, policy coordination requires policy transfer, i.e. *"a process whereby knowledge about policies, administrative arrangement, institutions, ideas and so on are used across time and/or space in the development of policies, institutions, and so on elsewhere"* (Bomberg & Peterson, 2000, p. 10).

When it comes to types of policy transfer, one categorization reflects the extent to which transfer is coercive, identifying a continuum between entirely voluntary transfer (termed 'lesson-drawing') to coercive transfer that comprises direct imposition of specific rules (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000, p. 13). Regional policy coordination in the area of higher education that is the focus of this study lies squarely in between. On the one hand, transfer is voluntary and, in formal terms, neither of the countries involved is in the position to unilaterally dictate the terms of coordination. On the other hand, the countries are not completely free to opt out of transfer, i.e. disregard entirely 'policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, ideas' from other countries involved in coordination, given that this might lead to negative consequences concerning issues that, often by default, span national borders (e.g. mobility of labour, recognition of qualifications).

Emphasis of knowledge suggests that policy transfer is not limited to simple information of what is done elsewhere, but that it also allows for some understanding of relationships between 'policies, administrative arrangements, institutions, ideas and so on' employed elsewhere as well as how and why they may lead to specific policy outcomes. The better that understanding is, the less likely it is that policy transfer would end up being 'uninformed', 'incomplete' or 'insufficient' (see Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000 for elaboration of this point). In other words, *"transfer is likely to be more effective where learning has also taken place"* (Stone, 2004, p. 546).

Thus, policy coordination provides opportunities for policy learning which comprises *"the updating of [policy] beliefs based on lived or witnessed experiences, analysis or social interaction"* (Dunlop & Radaelli, 2013, p. 599). Such opportunities increase with the increase of the degrees of coordination and, arguably, policy learning based on 'witnessed experiences' or 'social interaction' is a necessary condition for policy integration or strategic coordination to take place. Moreover, learning literature distinguishes between surface and deep learning, i.e. between changing beliefs linked to policy instruments and changing beliefs concerning the core aspects of policy (Dunlop, 2017; Hall, 1993). Arguably, negative and positive coordination concern primarily surface learning concerning policy instruments, while policy integration and strategic coordination may extend to deep(er) learning concerning policy goals.

It should be stressed that the focus on policy transfer and policy learning primarily highlights the process aspects and that it does not guarantee a specific outcome. In other words, use of knowledge and updating of policy beliefs does not necessarily result in policies closely emulating their source material; on the contrary, it can also serve only as inspiration for policy changes whereby the resulting policies have very little resemblance to the source (see Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000 on 'degrees of transfer'). One could even argue that all 'travelling ideas' will inevitably go through a process of translation and editing (Sevón & Czarniawska, 2005). Thus, it becomes important to focus also on the consequences of different levels of policy coordination and the outcomes of policy transfer and learning taking place thanks to such policy coordination. This brings forth the concept of policy convergence.

Policy convergence ('dependent variable')

Cross-national policy convergence concerns increasing similarity over time of *"one or more characteristics of a certain policy (e.g. objectives, policy instruments, policy settings)"* (Knill, 2005, p. 5). Holzinger and Knill (2005) make a useful distinction between (a) convergence of policy outputs – increasing similarity of policies adopted by a government, and (b) convergence of policy outcomes

– increasing similarity of effects of these policies. However, Pollitt (2002) offers a more nuanced distinction between (1) discursive convergence, (2) decisional convergence (cf. policy outputs convergence), (3) practice convergence, and (4) results convergence (cf. policy outcomes convergence). This distinction is important given that outcomes of policy transfer may remain limited only to ideas and thus lead only to discursive convergence due to complexity of policy implementation which *"rarely, if ever take[s] place in a 'level playing field… More commonly implementers find that they are obliged … to mould their innovations to the cultural, legal or organizational status quo"* (Pollitt, 2002, p. 476). Moreover, the distinction complements the process focus of the degrees of coordination (see above), by adding the outcomes dimension.

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

In the context of this study, this effectively leads to two distinct convergence dynamics within each region: (1) sigma convergence between countries belonging to the same region, i.e. sigma convergence within Balkans, Baltics, Benelux and Nordics (regional sigma convergence), and (2) depending on the existence of specific regional (e.g. Nordic) models, delta convergence within the different regions towards said regional model (regional delta convergence). Considering also the European level, two additional dynamics become possible: (3) sigma convergence between the different regions in Europe (European sigma convergence), and (4) delta convergence between the different countries and the European model (European delta convergence).

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

When it comes to sigma convergence, cultural and socio-economic factors matters. Heinze and Knill (2008) highlight in particular similarities in terms of linguistics, historical legacies with regards to higher education cultures and policies, political preferences of national governments, problems which the countries may be facing and socio-economic structures, as facilitating factors. On the basis of this,

one can expect sigma convergence within the regions to be more prominent than sigma convergence between the regions.

Concerning delta convergence, insights from Europeanization studies are of interest. Europeanization, understood narrowly,[1] concerns processes through which national and sub-national entities adapt to pressures coming from the European level (Radaelli, 2003). It is thus pertinent to adaptation between different governance levels (including national and regional) and factors which facilitate Europeanization can, therefore, be considered to facilitate delta convergence in general (see Sedelmeier, 2011 for a general discussion; Vukasovic, 2013 for adaptation to the context of higher education). In essence, delta convergence is facilitated by clarity of the regional or European model, its legitimacy as well as the legitimacy of the process leading to this model, clarity and strength of positive consequences of adapting to said model, resonance between the model and the domestic context, identification and participation of domestic actors in regional or European epistemic communities, domestic administrative capacities and prior regionalization or Europeanization of the domestic policy arena. Impeding factors include the adaptation costs for domestic actors, in particular those which are in the position to block changes, as well as strength of domestic institutional legacies. Of importance are also asymmetries between the regional or European and the national level with regards to power and information, facilitating the process when asymmetry is in in favour of the regional/European level, and impeding it if the asymmetry is in favour of the national level (see also Falkner, Hartlapp, & Treib, 2007; Falkner & Treib, 2008; Heinze & Knill, 2008 on compliance cultures). Having in mind the characteristics of the different degrees of coordination (see above), one can expect that delta convergence will be more prominent for higher degrees of coordination.

Connecting the dots

The study explores the relationship between regional policy coordination and policy convergence by identifying the level of policy coordination and the types of policy convergence within each region. The relationship between different elements of the framework and the research questions guiding the study are presented in Figure 1.

[1] See Olsen (2002) for a review of the different uses of the term.

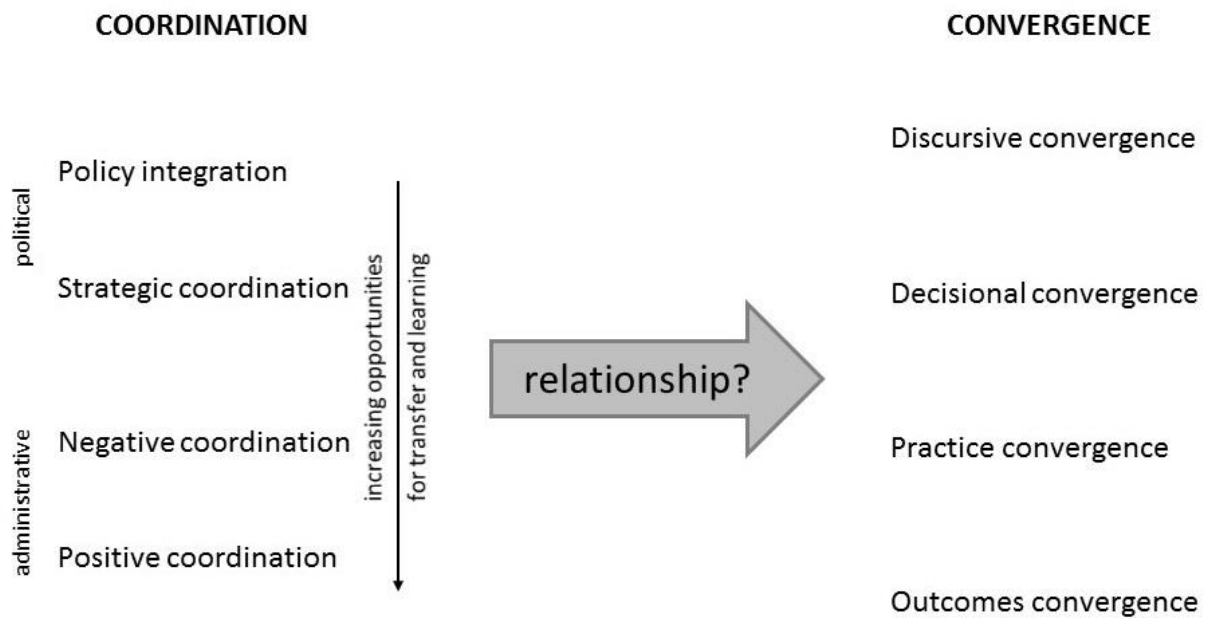

Figure 1 – Theoretical framework

Research design

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

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

Analysis of policy convergence is limited to three aspects of higher education policy: (1) quality assurance (QA) and accreditation, (2) qualifications frameworks and (3) recognition of qualifications. This choice was guided by several considerations. All three issues can be subject to

policy coordination. In essence, the only legally binding document within the Bologna Process – the so-called Lisbon Recognition Convention[2] – concerns precisely setting up of standards and guidelines for the process of recognition of qualifications. Countries participating in the Bologna Process are required to ratify it, thus making it part of their internal legislative system. In addition, countries can also develop special procedures for specific countries, further facilitating recognition or perhaps introducing automatic recognition of qualifications from specific countries. However, recognition of qualifications by definition concerns cross-national dynamics (so this issue can be considered as most-likely case of coordination), while QA and accreditation and qualifications frameworks do not necessarily require cross-national policy coordination, i.e. they can be, in theory, only domestic issues. That said, they are also issues which are at the core of European initiatives in higher education, embodied in the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG),[3] the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR),[4] the European Qualification Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF),[5] and the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF EHEA).[6]

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

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

The position of the different regions with regards to the EU is also different. Benelux countries are the founding members of the EU, while some of the Balkan and Nordic countries and all of the Baltics became members (much) later. In the Balkan and the Nordic region there are also countries which

[2] http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/lrc_EN.asp (page accessed 5 June 2017).
[3] http://www.ehea.info/cid105593/esg.html (page accessed 5 June 2017).
[4] https://www.eqar.eu/ (page accessed 5 June 2017).
[5] https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/sites/eac-eqf/files/leaflet_en.pdf (page accessed 5 June 2017).
[6] http://www.ehea.info/cid102843/overarching-framework-qualifications-the-ehea-2009.html (page accessed 5 June 2017).

are not EU members, although the difference should be made between Iceland and Norway which are part of EFTA, and all Balkan countries (apart from Croatia and Slovenia) which are currently vying for EU membership.

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

The 4 cases

Balkans

Due to dissolution of SFRY which also involved armed conflict and war fought in almost all of its former parts, policy coordination in any area, including higher education, has been a contentious issue and is very weakly (if at all) supported from within the region. However, various international organizations are pushing for more cooperation and all of the countries have a clear orientation towards the EU (with two of them already members). Previously, regional cooperation has been supported through the so-called Stability Pact for SEE, which from 2008 onwards has been transformed into a Regional Cooperation Council (RCC).[7] RCC is located in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) and is financed by both countries from the region but also some EU members and Switzerland. RCC has recently adopted its SEE[8] 2020 strategy, mirroring the EU 2020, and one of the five pillars concerns smart growth and the focus on education and innovation. In addition to this, RCC has supported the so-called Novi Sad Initiative,[9] within which regional events focusing on cooperation in higher education have been organized since 2005.

While all Balkan countries have set up their QA systems (including establishing a QA agency or a similar structure), the extent to which these systems operate in line with the ESG is quite varied. Four countries have agencies registered in EQAR (Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia and Slovenia), suggesting that these agencies operate in line with the ESG. Furthermore, there are indications that in some countries specific approaches to QA which go beyond the ESG were developed based on experience from other European countries (see e.g. Vukasovic, 2014), but there are also similarities in terms of QA

[7] http://www.rcc.int (page accessed 5 June 2017).

[8] Stands for 'South East Europe', a term often used to refer to the same region.

[9] http://www.nsinitiative.uns.ac.rs/ (page accessed 5 June 2017).

instruments within the region, in particular some ex-YU countries (e.g. Croatia and Serbia). In sum, there is primarily evidence of European delta convergence (primarily discursive, for some countries decisional) and limited European sigma convergence. Scarce evidence of regional sigma convergence is most likely a consequence of historical similarities then of communication.

Concerning qualifications frameworks, the situation is rather varied. One the one hand, Croatia and Montenegro lead the pack with self-certified NQFs, while Slovenia is lagging behind with difficulties in reaching a formal decision about NQF that is necessary for further implementation with regards, e.g. study programme development. The key obstacles for further progress concerning NQFs seem to be (a) within country coordination between different sectors and (b) vested interests of individuals who fear their pre-Bologna qualifications might be "downgraded" in terms of labour market relevance when translated into the NQF. Thus, the situation is a mixture of European delta convergence concerning policy instruments (decisional convergence) and policy goals (discursive convergence).

All countries apart from Kosovo have ratified the LRC. Kosovo, at present, cannot do that because, due to its disputed statehood. While formally LRC is transposed into the domestic law, the implementation of the different principles of the LRC varies, with Macedonia and Montenegro having the most limited implementation. Moreover, there is significant variance in the Balkans concerning who makes recognition decisions (HEIs, central government, independent agencies or a combination thereof). There are also bilateral agreements effectively ensuring automatic recognition of qualifications between (parts of) countries (e.g. between Serbia and Republika Srpska, part of Bosnia and Herzegovina), while at the same time there are instances in which one country does not recognise the degrees of another one (e.g. Serbia does not recognise Kosovo degrees). Thus, concerning recognition of qualifications, one can primarily identify European delta convergence concerning decisions.

Thus, European delta convergence concerning decisions seems to be the situation with regards to QA and recognition, while for qualifications frameworks it is a combination of discursive and decisional European delta convergence.

Baltics

Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council of Ministers are the two main overall regional political coordination structures in the region, the former for cooperation of parliaments. Education, Science and Culture Committee is one of the six committees of the Assembly and has been operational since 1992. However, higher education cooperation remained limited despite ambitious initial claims. In addition to the two main overarching bodies, there is also the Baltic Higher Education Co-ordination

Committee (BHECC, 1994) that implied coordination across multiple lines, including members of Rectors' conferences, staff of ministries and leaders of national ENIC-NARIC centres. Quality assurance and degree structures have been stated as key focus in documents by the Baltic Assembly.

In the area of quality assurance there has been formal cooperation since 1994, but there is not a specific regional model which would lead to regional delta convergence. At the same time, the historically close cooperation and similar challenges have created a potential for sigma convergence. There appears to be a very strong discursive convergence and there is some practice convergence in terms of the approaches to quality assurance. However, the legal status and organisation of the agencies differs significantly, as does their history with EQAR. EKKA – Estonian Higher Education Quality Agency became a member of EQAR in 2013, SKVC - Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) became a member in 2012. AIKA - Academic Information Centre (Latvia) is not a part of EQAR.

All of the three countries have adopted a qualifications framework and can be considered among the "early adopters". In Estonia the NQF was established already in 2008, albeit in a rather superficial manner at the time (Elken, 2016), Latvian framework was established in 2009/2010, and Lithuanian in 2010. All were also rather early referenced towards the EQF as an overarching framework. They all use 8 levels, while both Lithuania and Estonia have had an "empty" level 5 that in many countries would be equivalent of short cycle qualifications. They thus show a level of European delta decisional convergence as the framework structures resemble the EQF. There does not appear to be a specific regional approach.

LRC was ratified in all three countries a few years after it was launched in 1997. This, as well as a follow-up to the Bologna Process, led the Baltic countries to sign in February 2000 an agreement on recognition of degrees in the Baltic region. In 2014-2016 a project examining potential automatic recognition within the region (AURBELL) was carried out – supported by Erasmus+ and NARIC programme. As a spinoff of the Pathfinder project in developing regional automatic recognition processes following the Yerevan communique in 2015, a Nordic-Baltic admissions manual has been developed[10]. Recognition and quality assurance also show different kinds of links on national level. In Estonia they are part of the same umbrella organisation (Archimedes) but individual units, and in Lithuania the QA agency (SKVC) also acts as the ENIC-NARIC centre.

[10] Read more about the Nordic Baltic admission manual under the Nordic case.

Overall, the region shows that convergence is most clearly identified in the decisional stage for these policy themes, and that there is some movement towards practice convergence for example in the area of quality assurance.

Benelux

Benelux is a political and economic union, preceding the European Coal and Steel Community, and comprising an executive branch which includes, amongst other, the Council of Ministers, a judicial branch and what resembles a legislative branch but has a more advisory function. The Council can adopt four types of documents (from least to most binding): decisions, conventions, recommendations and directives. EU initiatives, in particular their implications for the Benelux countries are often discussed first within the Benelux Union, to ensure that a common agenda and strategy can be employed by the three countries towards the EU, as a way of ensuring influence. For much of the time since its foundation, economic cooperation was the basis of the union, but the renewal of the treaty signed in 2008 expanded the cooperation and introduced knowledge economy as one of the focal topics. In the area of higher education research there is only one overarching document adopted – a May 2015 decision concerning automatic recognition of qualifications (see below).

QA and accreditation systems in Benelux operate very much in line with the ESG, although exceptions from full compliance with the ESG can be identified. Where they exist, national QA agencies are registered in EQAR (indicating compliance with the ESG). The exception is Luxembourg which does not have a QA agency of its own but its overall approach to QA is deemed as fitting the ESG. There are also differences in practice, for example whether HEIs can be evaluated by foreign QA agencies. This suggest decisional European delta convergence. However, it should be stressed that Flanders and the Netherlands have a common QA agency since 2002, which implies convergence of practices between these two HE systems. NVAO is the only cross-national accreditation agency, whose exceptionality is increased by the fact that it does not operate in two countries, but rather in a country and a federal unit of another country. Thus, partial regional sigma convergence can be identified, and while it is quite developed (i.e. it is practice convergence), it is limited only to one part of the Benelux marked with linguistic similarity.

Concerning qualifications frameworks, Belgium (both Wallonia and Flanders) and the Netherlands have gone rather far with aligning their NQFs with QF-EHEA and EQF (including self-certification), while Luxembourg is still in discussion stage. This might not be surprising given that Luxembourg has been developing its own higher education system only relatively recently so the need to have a

clear qualifications framework has been lower. Overall, there is European delta convergence concerning instruments.

All three countries have ratified the LRC. Although Belgium was the last one to ratify it, it came furthest in relation to embedding all important principles of the LRC in its national legislation, while the Netherlands and even more so Luxembourg have still some way to go. The practices of recognition – in particular who decides – are quite different in the three countries under study: HEIs in Flanders (Belgium), HEIs in cooperation with ENIC-NARIC in the Netherlands and Luxembourg and a combination of HEIs, ENIC-NARIC and central government in Wallonia (Belgium). This indicates that there is at best European delta convergence with regards to decisions (adoption of policy instruments). That said, significant changes have been made concerning automatic recognition of qualifications. First Flanders and the Netherlands agreed on mutual recognition of their qualifications by amending the NVAO Treaty (see above), and then pushed other parts of Benelux (Wallonia and Luxembourg) to work on automatic recognition. In May 2015 the Benelux Council of Ministers adopted the decision on automatic recognition of qualifications awarded in Benelux. Thus, regional sigma convergence with regards to adoption of specific policy instruments (i.e. decisional convergence), is the current situation, with a recent shift towards practice convergence (given the recent automatic recognition decision).

In sum, the main convergence patterns in Benelux are European delta (decisional) and partial regional sigma (decisional and practice, depending on the issue at hand).

Nordics

The Nordic region along with Benelux countries in this sample of countries represents the more formalised regional coordination structure. Formalized cooperation dates back to the 50s and 70s and the Nordic cooperation agreement from 1971 was the first main document for establishing cooperation in culture, education and research (Nordic Council of Ministers, 1988). This cooperation has largely remained in place also post Bologna and EU initiatives. There are also a number of formalised cooperation agreements in education, with respect to admission, recognition, regulated professions and cooperation on other levels of education. For instance the agreement on admission was established already in 1996, well before the debates in the Bologna Process. Furthermore, formalised cooperation/network structures on regional level exist for quality assurance agencies (NOQA) and ENIC-NARIC centres (NORRIC). One could argue that these coordination efforts suggest positive coordination but also elements of strategic coordination by setting common targets.

The Nordic QA agencies cooperate through Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA). NOQA in its basic form was formed already in 1992 and later formalized as a network of QA agencies in 2003. Its aim is to create joint understanding in the region. The network meets annually to discuss various issues, in addition to the joint projects and programmes. However, the basic legislative framework for the agencies differs, and their authorisation from the state varies. This suggests that despite a very high degree of coordination between the units, and a level of discursive convergence, there is limited convergence of the format of QA agencies. At the same time, the agencies in the Nordic countries (and also Nordic and Baltic region) highlight that they share principal understanding of how to apply peer review, project leadership, internal quality culture development and the manner in which processes and methods are developed. Denmark, Finland and Norway have their quality assurance agencies as part of EQAR, while this is not the case with Iceland and Sweden.

In terms of qualifications frameworks, the Nordic countries have adopted rather different approaches to establishing an NQF and speed of adoption. Finland adopted the FiNQF only in 2017, after many years of delays among else in the parliament, while the Swedish framework was launched in 2015. Only Denmark and Norway are included in the Ploteus system as they have fully referenced their frameworks to the EQF, in 2011 and 2012 respectively. The Icelandic referencing report was presented in 2014. The Icelandic and Norwegian frameworks have 7 levels, while the other three also operate with 8 level frameworks.

With respect to recognition, the Nordic countries have longstanding traditions of mobility within the region. Due to this high level of mobility, the issue of recognition has been of historical relevance. Reykjavik declaration in 2004 (Nordic Declaration on Recognition of Diplomas, Degrees and Other Qualifications in Higher Education) replaced the earlier Sigtuna agreement from 1975 and became the regional follow-up of the LRC (which all countries ratified and almost fully implemented). In November 2016, the ministers revised this and have now committed to working towards automatic recognition. A spinoff of the EHEA pathfinder project on automatic recognition for the Nordic-Baltic region was the Nordic/Baltic admissions manual that outlines equivalent degrees across the two regions stating that applicants with these degrees “should be eligible for access in the next level” but that final decision lies with the higher education institutions.

In sum, this is a region where formalized collaboration has been well established, and that can be seen as one of the front-runners in terms of establishing regional models for collaboration in specific policy areas. Quality assurance and recognition in this respect show that degrees of practice convergence have been identified in quality assurance and recognition.

Reflections, conclusions and further research

One of the main concerns of this analysis is the relationship between coordination and convergence, and implicitly – do higher degrees of coordination lead to more convergence? This question has a number of complexities built into this – both concerned with the notion of convergence, as well as its relationship to coordination. In this concluding section we first reflect on the approaches that were adopted to understanding convergence and coordination, and then regarding the possible relationship between the two.

First of all, the approach to exploring convergence by distinguishing between delta and sigma convergence as well as the four stages proposed by Pollitt provides a more elaborate way to examine convergence processes and has in general been termed as useful for unpacking complex convergence processes in a multilevel context. However, it is clear that identifying discursive and decisional convergence is less complicated task than identifying convergence of practices and in particular outcomes. However, there are good reasons to echo Pollitts call for analysing convergence as a whole trajectory in order to avoid overstating the effects of convergence that could happen by only focusing on decisions and not sufficiently on practices and outcomes. However, the sequential approach Pollitt implicitly proposes, and the four categories outlined as well as the primary focus of analysis have some limitations.

The stage-wise distinction implies that convergence can be viewed in a sequential manner – that there is more or less of convergence, implicitly suggesting that the discursive-decisional-practice-results is process towards more (or increased depth of) convergence. Pollitt's suggestion that these are "stages" and that this is a process that can stop at any point is also suggestive of this view. At the same time, the empirical results in this article suggest that this sequential approach can be challenged, i.e. practice convergence can take place without decisional convergence. Having in mind the garbage can models for decision-making (Cohen, March, & Olsen, 1972), one can question this underlying linearity.

Second, this sequential view can be challenged by the notions of isonymism and isopraxism (Elken, Stensaker, & Hovdhaugen, 2017; Erlingsdottir & Lindberg, 2005). These two concepts from organizational studies can be useful to further unpack the relationship between discourses/concepts and practices. In essence, isonymism refers to situations where a similar label is used for different practices, neatly relating to Pollitt's suggestion where you would have discursive convergence but not practice convergence. However, Erlingsdottir and Lindberg (2005) also refer to isopraxism, where one can find similar organizational practices, but with different labels. Having in mind the notion of translation and adaptation of policies in multi-level contexts, one can thus expect that there can also

be convergence of practices, without this being necessarily accompanied by discursive or decisional convergence. While Pollitt also builds on the notion of isomorphism and explains a variety of pressures towards isomorphism that can be driven forward by coercive, mimetic or normative isomorphic pressures (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), his argument is also marked by an underlying assumption of this isomorphism as being comprehensive and retaining that underlying sequential idea.

The notion of discursive convergence can also be somewhat further elaborated. The approach proposed by Pollitt was rather explicitly focused on identifying how specific themes become “talk of the day”. However, a distinctions can be made with respect to convergence of identified policy problems and convergence of proposed solutions, given that the way in which proposed solutions are coupled to national problems is highly relevant for how this process takes place nationally (Elken, 2016). At the same time, when discussing discursive convergence, the differentiation of discursive agreement on problems and solutions could be a worthwhile distinction to unpack the notions of legitimacy and shared epistemic understanding. For studies on convergence, this could also potentially challenge some of the assumptions of essentially economic factors driving forward convergence whereas institutional factors are limiting convergence or driving forward divergence (Heichel, Pape, & Sommerer, 2005)

Further extensions could also be made for practice convergence, with more nuanced conceptualisations and differentiations regarding degree of formalization of such practices, and whether they have become taken for granted.

This points to another point of discussion regarding convergence, concerning its ontological status and its neat positioning as a dependent variable. The question is whether convergence is seen as an outcome of a process, or whether convergence itself is a process of converging. While this study adopted an approach where focus was on outcomes of convergence, there are good arguments to be made for viewing convergence from a process perspective (Heichel et al., 2005). In general, this process perspective is sometimes associated by adopting a clear time frame for two measurement points. However, one can also extend this process argument further and view convergence as a dynamic process where various aspects of convergence at times are aligned, and at times can provide contestations, and where various elements converge at multiple speeds. A snapshot view, even with multiple measurement points, can in such instances also miss out on some complexities of convergence processes. Methodologically, this would point towards more rich process tracing perspectives than two-point measurement on whether something has become more similar over time. The two point measurement would still implicitly assume that convergence is a one-dimensional process, rather than be able to account for contestations, contradictions and tensions.

Regarding coordination, having in mind the basic tenets of coordination as being an issue of taking a specific stance to coordinate policies, one can argue that any coordination essentially implies a degree of discursive convergence in terms of Pollitt's operationalisation of discursive convergence as the converging conceptual agenda, in other words, the issues that are in focus (Pollitt, 2002). Consequently, it would seem that a degree of discursive convergence is implicit in any coordination process, in particular in light of European integration processes, unless a country has explicitly opted out. However, it is not a simple link of more coordination leading to higher (if one would assume sequential approach to convergence) degrees of convergence. One could also foresee a situation where the direction of effects is the opposite – that is – increased convergence as a result of European integration initiatives can lead to strengthened regional coordination.

The picture becomes even more complicated when shifting focus to other forms of convergence, as links to coordination are no longer as clear. An element that can be seen as a potential intervening variable is administrative capacity on regional level, available resources on regional level, and policy-making traditions. That is, regional coordination is not only a question of whether actors/states decide to cooperate with respect to a specific issue area, it is also a question of the kind of formal governance architecture that is already in place, possible spillovers from other sectors, as well as resource constraints that can either facilitate or inhibit coordination (with different possible rationales: i.e. in terms of having sufficient resources for regional coordination, or in terms of emphasizing the necessity to cooperate due to domestic constraints).

In essence, for policy coordination and convergence literature, the study shows that the relationship between coordination and convergence is complex and likely a result of multiple co-existing mechanisms and processes. It also emphasizes some of the limitations of viewing convergence as a sequence, and points to further need to nuance what is being converged and the extent to which something is converging. For studies on European integration, the study shows that regional level needs to be taken into account when analysing integration processes, as a number of regional cooperation agreements prevail, interact with European instruments and provide alternative arenas for mutual learning and policy transfer. For higher education studies, the study shows that there are still significant gaps in fully understanding the complexities of why and how nation states engage in policy transfer and learning, and how these clusters of countries within Europe affect overall European integration in higher education. Furthermore, distinguishing between various forms of convergence has proven to yield new insights into understanding complex policy processes in Europe of Knowledge. As Bologna Process has grown vast and EU coordination appears to be somewhat at a standstill in higher education, will these clusters of countries be the way forward? Mutual

recognition projects would suggest that there is at least some realisation of the importance of this regional approach.

Literature on policy convergence is ripe with multitude of mechanisms and processes and can in some sense be seen as fragmented and overloaded with multiple operationalisations (Heichel et al., 2005). For this reason, careful and explicit operationalisation is necessary. Furthermore, studies should not assume convergence to be a one-dimensional process that can be measured through two specific measurement points, but instead view it as a complex process of multiple interdependent factors. While making the neat figures and tables somewhat more messy, this is also likely to better reflect complex realities of convergence processes.

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