A Critical Review of the Bologna Process to Draw Lessons for the Internationalization of Higher Education in Africa

Yomni Makonnen Tesfaye**,** *York University, Toronto, Canada*

Abstract

With Globalization and the increasing commodification of education has pushed governments and universities worldwide to boost their competitiveness, while simultaneously promoting international cooperation (Piro, 2016). The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, is a large-scale initiative that works to harmonize European higher education, promoting mobility within the region and advancing Europe as a knowledge-hub (European Commission, n.d.). While primarily concerned with Europe, the Bologna Process has had global influence. Some African education systems have adopted the process despite unique challenges such as resource limitations, colonial histories, and political instability (Alemu, 2018). This essay critically reflects on the Bologna Process, its impact on higher education in Africa, and explores how Africa can learn from it to improve its higher education landscape in sustainable and contextually relevant ways. I argue that while the Bologna Process promotes mobility and international cooperation, it is unsuitable for the African context, where it becomes a form of soft power, reinforcing European hegemony (Charlier & Croché, 2011). African institutions require internationalization strategies tailored to their historical, cultural and socio-political context to ensure that education serves Africa's internal needs and goals.

Keywords: *Bologna Process, internationalization, African Higher Education, European Higher Education Area*

Yomni Makonnen Tesfaye: Yomni Makonnen is pursuing a Master of Education at York University's Faculty of Education program, with a focus on (inter)national education in Sub-Saharan Africa. She hopes to combine her scholarly interests with her experience in educational intervention to support educational development across Africa. Email address: yominmak@yorku.ca

 ISSN: 2816-9344

Introduction

With the intensification of globalization and the commodification of education, governments and higher education institutions worldwide are implementing various strategies to increase their competitiveness while simultaneously promoting international cooperation (Piro, 2016). The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, is a large-scale initiative that works to harmonize European higher education, promoting mobility within the region and advancing Europe as a knowledge-hub (European Commission, n.d.). While primarily concerned with Europe, the Bologna Process has had global influence. In Africa, this process influences education systems even though they are uniquely challenged by resource limitations, colonial histories, and political instability (Alemu, 2018). This essay critically reflects on the Bologna Process and its impact on higher education in Africa. Additionally, this paper explores how Africa can learn from the Bologna Process to improve its higher education landscape in sustainable and contextually relevant ways. While the Bologna Process promotes mobility and international cooperation, I argue that it is unsuitable for the African context, where it becomes a form of soft power, reinforcing European hegemony (Charlier & Croché, 2011). African institutions require internationalization strategies tailored to their historical, cultural, and socio-political context to ensure that education serves Africa's internal needs and goals.

Theoretical Context: Internationalization, Harmonization & Regionalization

Institutional definitions, rationales, and manifestations of internationalization vary, depending on the values and interests of the institutions in question (De Wit, 2013; Knight, 2008). While internationalization is a perpetually evolving phenomenon with no single definition, for this essay, Knight's (2008) definition will serve as a beginning point from which

to conceptualize the phenomena. Knight (2008, p.2) defined internationalization as "the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of higher education". Knight's (2008) definition is broad enough to complement and work alongside other definitions of internationalization (e.g., Heleta & Chasi, 2022) and encapsulate various strategies and motives for internationalization.

Internationalization and globalization are linked. As Knight (2008) stated, "internationalization is changing the world of higher education, and globalization is changing the world of internationalization" (p. 5). Globalization increases global interconnectedness, enhancing the spread of Eurocentric values, capitalist systems/logics, and institutional competition. Internationalization happens in response to the spread of these values, systems, and logics (Woldegiorgis, 2017). However, citing Brandenburg and De Wit (2011), De Wit (2013) highlighted how "activities that are more related to the concept of globalization (higher education as a tradable commodity) are increasingly executed under the flag of internationalization" (p. 16).

Two terms that frequently appear within the literature are harmonization and regionalization. In a review of harmonization and regionalization in Africa, Knight (2013) found that harmonization is used interchangeably with internationalization in the African context; however, harmonization refers specifically to the alignment of higher education systems in different countries. Knight (2013) defined regionalization as a "process of building closer collaborations and alignment among higher education actors and systems in a designated area or framework commonly called a region" (p. 349). Institutions, policymakers, and scholars often define internationalization and regionalization in overlapping ways and pursue similar purposes

through them. However, scholars debate whether these concepts are complementary, contradictory, or mutually exclusive (Knight, 2013).

The Bologna Process is a form of regionalization as the efforts to build collaborations and harmonize institutions happen within a specified geographic region. However, the Bologna Process also has an 'external dimension' through which it facilitates international cooperation and standardization. For this reason, Karras (2013) argued that such regionalization can be understood as a strategy of internationalizing European higher education. Similarly, within Africa, various countries and higher education institutions made regional agreements as part of their broader effort to internationalize African higher education and strengthen relationships between Africa and Europe (Alemu, 2018; Woldegiorgis, 2017). Though the Bologna Process impacted Africa in a regionalized pattern, a significant portion of the Euro-African relationships it inspired, emerged through the initiatives of individual institutions. These relationships developed in response to ad hoc opportunities rather than through coordinated regional efforts (Alemu, 2018). As such, for this essay, I frame regionalization as a form/strategy of internationalization.

Introduction to the Bologna Process

The Bologna Process was launched in 1999 with the signing of the Bologna Declaration. By establishing the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Bologna Process aims to "bring more coherence to higher education systems across Europe" (European Commission, n.d.). Such coherence is pursued through strategic focus on improving student and staff mobility and enhancing employability. Signatories also work towards making European higher education more inclusive, accessible, and globally competitive. In addition to other lines of action, the 48 participating countries have each committed to introducing a three-cycle system of education

(three year bachelor's, two year master's, and three year doctoral studies); recognizing qualifications and periods of study completed at other universities within the EHEA; and promoting the quality and relevance of learning and teaching by implementing a quality assurance system (European Commission, n.d.). Central to the Bologna Process are initiatives like the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), which was started to allow credits accumulated at one institution to transfer to another (European Commission, n.d.).

Prior to the Bologna Process, European countries and institutions demonstrated interest in increasing student mobility through several large internationalization initiatives like the Socrates and Erasmus programs (Mngo, 2019). These pre-existing programs demonstrate the perceived value of internationalization within the region; they are the fertile soil in which the Bologna Process has flourished. Citing Carney (2009), Piro (2016) suggested that the Bologna Process could be described as a policyscape:

> …an ensemble of political ideas and visions (managerial practices, conceptions of the role of the state in education, the functions of education etc.) that are shared by a range of political actors operating on multiple scales and affect the way these actors think and decide about education policy. (p. 31)

Implementation reports suggest that most countries have introduced higher education reforms to comply with the terms of the Bologna Process. However, several studies highlight disparities in implementation across countries (Brogger, 2018; Triandafyllidou et al., 2011).

There is an 'external dimension' of the Bologna process, which seeks to make Europe more prominent and competitive within the global higher education landscape. The external dimension involves strategic partnering with institutions around the world (Mngo, 2019). In addition to the intended results of the external dimension, non-signatories are still impacted by

the Bologna Process reforms due to the general interconnectedness of higher education (Mngo, 2019). The unprecedented scale and potential of the Bologna Process has stimulated relationships with international partners looking to build connections within the EHEA. It has also inspired reforms in other regions of the world including the African continent (European Commission, n.d.; Alemu, 2018).

Key Opportunities and Challenges Associated with the Bologna Process

As intended, through the external dimension and the adoption of the ECTS system, the Bologna Process facilitated student and staff mobility within Europe and internationally (Teichler, 2012). Simultaneously, the Bologna Process has facilitated qualification recognition across institutions and countries in Europe (European Commission, n.d.). Moreover, the Process has facilitated productive international relationships between institutions, while inspiring other global regions to initiate similar reforms (Alemu, 2018).

The Bologna Process has enhanced the soft power of its signatories and of the region as a whole. Soft power refers to the influence that an entity – whether a region, a country, or an institution – can mobilize to achieve its goals without coercion (Nye, 2005). With reference to nations specifically, Nye (2005) argued that soft power is largely determined by a country's culture, political values, and foreign policies. Together, these factors shape the 'attractiveness' of a country, thus facilitating or hindering international partnerships and agreements. The choice to sign on to the Bologna Process is a political statement as it communicates national values and interests. In turn, this influences how other countries and institutions perceive and engage with signatories (Karras, 2013). The global export of European educational norms provides signatories with global soft power. Institutional standardization increases the circulation of soft

power among signatories. Moreover, the formalization of the EHEA allows non-signatories to efficiently develop relationships with multiple countries and/or institutions at once.

Education is closely tied to the nation state. Educational landscapes are used to demonstrate and measure a state's modernity through its ability to keep up with global trends and competition. As Piro (2016) stated, "nations rally around their education system as a symbol of national identity, political unity, and societal harmony" (p. 37). As such, countries have sometimes perceived major educational reforms associated with the Bologna Process as a threat to state sovereignty and national identity (Alemu, 2018; Piro, 2016; Triandafyllidou et al., 2011).

For example, in Greece, the perceived threat to state sovereignty and identity resulted in major public contestation and demonstrations against the implementation of reforms. Though political parties were in support of the reforms, public perception presented a major barrier to process adoption (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011). The issue of state identity and sovereignty highlights a major challenge in the implementation of transnational reforms, particularly those that seek to standardize education. Brogger (2019) argued that in many countries, the public fears standardization because it is understood as a way to "govern at a distance" (p. 158). This is particularly pertinent within the context of the Bologna Process as it is both voluntary and lacks a legal center (Brogger, 2019).

The education standards set by the Bologna Process are based on learning outcomes. They do not outline specific content and are intended to be applied in diverse ways depending on the context (Brogger, 2018). Even still, through case studies of Greece, Turkey, and Croatia, Triandafyllidou et al. (2011) found that the standardization of higher education through Bologna Process reforms led to the disappearance of the local context. In addition to losing a sense of 'the local', the lack of consideration for on the ground realities meant that ideals of the Bologna

Process were not accompanied with the resources required to realize them. As such 'the local' was invisible in the process of developing reforms. 'The local' was invisibilized once again in the reformed education system, detached from the historical, political, and socio-cultural environment in which it exists. Considering this 'loss of the local', signatories evidently need mechanisms to promote diversity and prevent the dilution or erasure of local culture and values.

With the global adoption of neoliberal ideals, education is becoming increasingly commodified and corporatized (Piro, 2016). There are two major ways that this affects education. Firstly, education departs from humanistic ideals towards economic goals, like producing individuals with values and skills suited for the workplace (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011). As a result, the actors involved in shaping education change as well. Namely, multinational corporations work through international organizations and regional trade groups to influence education policies (Prio, 2016). Secondly, the growing commodification of education inherently introduces competition between institutions and nations (Mngo, 2019). Brogger (2018) argued that the commodification of higher education and associated neoliberal ideals makes the Bologna Process virtually indistinguishable from the Lisbon Agenda, which set out to improve the economic growth of the European Union.

The Bologna model of higher education facilitates the commodification of education through market-driven policies and the standardization of education, which turns education into a global commodity. On the ground, individuals understand the Bologna Process as dehumanising because it creates a "productive individual rather than a thinking one" (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011, p. 6). As such, in implementing reforms modeled by the Bologna Process, African nations need to consider the purpose and value of education, beyond an economic imperative. Such

consideration is essential in national and regional efforts to re-instill or maintain the humanistic qualities of education.

The Bologna Process is rooted in the Anglo-Saxon education system. This background raises questions about which values the Process legitimizes, and who is implicitly given the power to determine critical questions regarding the form and purpose of education. Such decisions have significant implications for individuals and institutions around the world (Alemu, 2018). That being said, a major strength of how the Bologna Process has been managed is that the steering committee is responsive to feedback and social responses (Triandafyllidou et al., 2011). This responsiveness may work to challenge inherent Anglo-Saxon assumptions and shows a reflexivity that will be critical to the success of any reforms in the African context.

The Bologna Process in Africa

While African countries had demonstrated the need for harmonization and mobility within higher education long before 1999, there was no implemented strategy until after the Bologna Process was adopted in Europe (Mngo, 2019). The Bologna Process was introduced to Africa through three major routes. First, the African Union explicitly endorsed the Bologna Process in adopting it as a model for their own 2007 strategy, "*Harmonization of Higher Education Programs in Africa: Strategy for the African Union*". Second, the external dimension of the Bologna Process promoted relationships between African and European higher education. Third, colonial ties bestow on Europe significant material and soft power within the African continent (Alemu, 2018; Charlier & Croché, 2011).

Scholars argue that the external dimension of the Bologna Process increases student and faculty mobility, and the quality of education as international cooperations force African

institutions to meet certain standards relating to academic credentials and research productivity (Sall & Ndjaye, 2007; Teichler, 2012). However, this only counts as an improvement insofar as the quality of education is measured by how competitive the educational system is globally. Given the threats that neoliberal ideals pose to the core value and purpose of education - particularly for Africa, which has historically been harmed as a direct result of neoliberal policies - the underpinning logic of this measure warrants scrutiny. Nonetheless, internationalization strategies inspired by the Bologna Process have introduced new methods of education. These methods include online platforms and competency-based frameworks (in place of accumulating credit hours) that certify students as meeting employer demands rather than completing full degrees (Piro, 2016).

A significant portion of the current higher education landscape was developed during the colonial period and is largely modelled on the institutions of the colonizer (Sall & Ndjaye, 2007). Some scholars (e.g. Karras, 2013) argue that because African higher education was already modelled after European education through colonization, the Bologna Process has not significantly changed existing systems. However, other scholars (e.g. Alemu, 2018; Mngo, 2019) argue that is only the case for British ex-colonies as the Bologna Process is largely inspired by Anglo-Saxon models. Alemu (2018) has identified how significant policy borrowing follows colonial ties, wherein French and Portuguese ex-colonies, for example, have introduced reforms to match the French and Portuguese versions of the Bologna Process respectively.

Within Africa, harmonization strategies are highly regionalized with agreements and joint efforts being initiated within existing cooperative groups such as the Southern African Development Community (SADEC), Economic Monetary Union of West Africa (EMUWA), Maghreb countries, and the East African Community (EAC) (Alemu, 2018; Mngo, 2019). There

are country-level and regional differences regarding the extent to which the Bologna Process has impacted African countries. These differences are partly the result of how relationships with European countries vary across Africa. For example, Maghreb countries experienced more influence from the Bologna Process because their participation in the Euro-Mediterranean higher education research area facilitates the transfer of educational ideals from the EHEA (Karras, 2013). While the African Union and European Union are co-funding an African credit transfer system, the EAC, which includes Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, has also developed a credit transfer system without collaboration with European entities (Alemu, 2018; HAQAA3, 2024). Given that the adoption of the Bologna Process often occurs through colonial legacy relationships, scholars have examined power dynamics and whether the Bologna process reproduces colonial patterns. As Charlier and Croché (2011) found, Europe has used the Bologna Process as a form of soft power to assert hegemonic influence over African higher education systems with limited regard for the local context. Thus, the Bologna Process ultimately works to exacerbate power imbalances, maintain Africa's dependency on the West, and erodes Africa's educational sovereignty. Although influence varies across the continent, existing regional cooperations facilitate the adoption of such internationalization strategies. This is because such transnational cooperation creates defined groups through which ideals circulate. While perceived as a threat to national sovereignty in certain countries like Senegal (Sall & Ndjaye, 2007), Europe's political and cultural dominance has effectively forced many African countries to modify their educational systems (Charlier & Croché, 2011).

Efforts to standardize educational systems, both internally and in accordance with European institutions, may pose a threat to Africa's diverse epistemologies and pedagogies. Moreover, given the existing diversity of educational systems and disparities in available

resources, the African Union's vision of a Pan-African strategy is bound to produce diverse results across the region. Powerful and well-resourced countries, like South Africa, may continue to grow and become more regionally and globally competitive. However, acutely under-resourced countries, particularly those experiencing protracted war or political instability may fall further behind, if interventions are not uniquely tailored to their context. Not doing so may result in the effective exiling of certain countries and institutions, with major repercussions as people search for high quality and accessible education.

Brain drain is a major challenge for Africa and thus requires tailored strategy. Regionally, Africa not only has the highest amount of brain drain in the world, but the amount is also increasing (Charlier & Croché, 2011; Firsing, 2024). Considering this, it is essential that African education is developed with consideration for the endogenous and sustainable development of the continent. Given the competitive pressure to replicate Western education, African educational reforms must prioritize regional and continental visions over those of the West. Such prioritization is required to not only develop but also to retain skilled individuals.

Structural barriers significantly limit the efficacy of implementing a project like the Bologna Process in Africa. The lack of infrastructure and funding for educational spaces isolates institutions while economic pressures force institutions to limit admissions (Sall & Ndjaye, 2011). To be most effective within the limits of national markets and resources, Sall and Ndjaye (2011) suggested that institutions should specialize according to their strengths, instead of each institution attempting to provide a comprehensive range of courses. While this theoretically makes sense, particularly for the sake of resource optimization, it seems implausible. Notably, the question of how this would happen goes unanswered, and the practical implications of dividing academic responsibilities in this way goes unaddressed.

Africa faces the same challenges that the Bologna Process seeks to address in Europe, including student and faculty mobility, however, the scale and complexity of these challenges are incomparable. Poverty, civil conflicts, disease, natural disasters, trade imbalances, colonial legacies, and inaccessible travel are all compounding factors (Alemu, 2018; Karras, 2013). The Bologna Process was developed to solve challenges arising in a post-industrial Europe. As a pre-industrial region, these solutions are ineffective for the current state and history of the African continent (Alemu, 2018). Additionally, similarly to the loss of the local in Europe, the Westward orientation of higher education in Africa – which is intensified by the commodification of education – influences pedagogy, curricula, research priorities, and values in ways that alienate African higher education from its context. Finally, the adoption or imposition of the Bologna Process on African countries maintains European dominance and hegemony, reiterating the need to develop context-specific strategies.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Bologna Process is an ambitious initiative that aims to harmonize and internationalize higher education in Europe, with significant global implications for Africa and elsewhere. The Bologna Process has influenced Africa by inspiring regional collaboration and harmonization which promotes mobility, innovative methods of education, and global competitiveness. That being said, the Bologna Process is not adequately suited for Africa due to the context-based challenges that the framework was not designed to resolve or effectively navigate. The adoption of the Bologna Process risks the erasure of diversity within higher education, including the loss of local epistemologies, while simultaneously reproducing colonial dynamics that reinforce European hegemony over Africa. This essay does not tell the full story

of the Bologna Process and its impacts in Africa. However, it draws on the most prominent trends to share critical observations for consideration while developing educational policies and strategies within the African continent.

To improve the higher education landscape in African, context-specific strategies must be developed. These strategies must prioritize local needs and realities, before seeking to be the same as, or compete with Western institutions. In this way, Africa can address local challenges and disparities, such as brain drain, while simultaneously reducing the dependence on Western partners for Africa's growth and development. Overtime, developments made in this vein have the potential to provide the continent with soft power, just as the Bologna Process has done for Europe.

Leaning on equity-driven conceptualizations of internationalization that center epistemic plurality, anti-racist, and anti-hegemonic values (e.g. Heleta & Chasi, 2022) may help challenge colonial legacies and historic power imbalances between Africa and the West. By critically reflecting on the successes and limitations of the Bologna Process, the continent can work towards developing higher education systems that are sustainable, and reflective of the diverse and vibrant socio-cultural landscape of Africa. Future research that investigates the perspectives of students and staff in Africa may contribute to developing strategies that are responsive to on-the-ground realities.

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