



Education Policy Borrowing: Adoption and adaptation of Bologna Process ideas in the Cameroonian higher education system - A Summary

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Abstract

Although initially a European reform, the Bologna Process has had a spill-over effect in other parts of the world. This paper, based on the public lectio of my doctoral dissertation, used policy borrowing as a theoretical framework to examine the adoption and adaptation of Bologna reforms in Cameroon, a country with a complex colonial and post-colonial history. My dissertation sought answers to three research questions focusing on the reasons for the adoption in Cameroon, the introduction, dissemination and local response to the adoption in Cameroon and the implementation of some of the lines of action in Cameroon and what they reveal about the use of borrowed policies at the local level. These questions were addressed in four original articles, using data from text documents and interviews and analysed mainly through thematic analysis. The findings, based on the four articles, drew attention to both internal and external reasons for adoption, and how and why what was adopted was locally adapted to suit the local context. The findings contributed to the research and international debate on the transformations exerted by the Bologna Process outside the European higher education area referred to as the external dimension of the Bologna Process.

Keywords: Policy borrowing, Bologna Process, Cameroon, Higher Education

Introduction: situating the study

This summary is based on the public defence lectio of my doctoral dissertation. My doctoral dissertation discusses the question of education policy borrowing, focusing on adoption and adaptation of an originally European reform, the Bologna Process (BP), in the higher education (HE) system of Cameroon, a country with a complex colonial and post-colonial history (Eta, 2018). My dissertation builds from the understanding that, although the state is responsible for the policies that it adopts, these policies can also be influenced

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by other states, international agreements, or global trends. Globalisation has led to increased movement, interaction and access to people, ideas and practices across borders, creating all kinds of interdependence. In addition, the increased involvement of the world's regions in HE governance also impacts on national policy-making (Chou & Ravinet, 2015). In other words, policies and practices in one country, region or regional and international agreements can significantly impact on the policies that are adopted and implemented in other nations or regions.

In comparative education, different terms such as policy learning, policy mobility, imitation, emulation, importation and policy borrowing have been used to describe this process. I used the term policy borrowing in my dissertation as it continues to dominate the literature. Policy borrowing (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, 2014; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2008) has been used widely to describe the deliberate and conscious adoption of ideas, policies, or practices from elsewhere (Phillips & Ochs, 2004) or to describe, on a general level, the transnational flow of global policies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Verger, 2014). Because education policy borrowing is almost the norm in today's policy-making, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the borrowing of policies and practices from elsewhere has contributed to the convergence of systems of education worldwide.

In 2006, I was studying for the *Maîtrise* (a certificate issued two years after a bachelor's degree) at the University of Yaoundé I, Cameroon. At that time, there were rumours that we were the last batch of students to be issued that degree because the system was going to be reformed, which would lead to a replacement of the *Maîtrise* (and other intermediate degrees) at French-inspired universities in Cameroon. Back then, I thought it was a Cameroonian initiative to harmonise and tackle some of its challenges emerging from its dual French and Anglo-Saxon traditions. When I enrolled as a PhD student in 2011, I was interested in studying how the Cameroonian HE system was responding to external/global influences. After reading the literature on global trends in HE, the BP stood out as a major reform programme in HE that also was impacting HE reforms in Cameroon. I, thus, set out in my dissertation to understand why a reform programme conceived and designed for HE systems in Europe became attractive to Cameroon, how the ideas were introduced in Cameroon and how they were used for reform purposes.

The Bologna Process: aims and signatories

The BP is a European intergovernmental agreement which was initiated in 1998, when the European ministers of HE of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom came together in Sorbonne, Paris, and signed the Sorbonne Declaration, with the intention of harmonising European HE systems (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). In 1999, they invited other European HE ministers to Bologna, Italy, and 29 of them signed the Bologna Declaration to create the European HE Area (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The BP was born

out of the need to promote citizen mobility and employability, achieve greater comparability and compatibility of the European system, and strengthen the international competitiveness and attractiveness of the European HE area (Bologna Declaration, 1999).

To achieve its aims, European ministers of HE formulated different lines of action in their declarations and communiqués. Some of these lines of action included the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, a common system of credits (the European credit transfer system), the promotion of mobility and employability of graduates (Bologna Declaration, 1999) and a system based on three cycles (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). The BP set in motion structural reforms that have been adopted by 48 HE systems in Europe. These 48 countries include all 28 countries of the European Union and the other 20 countries, although not EU member countries are Signatories to the European cultural convention as agreed in the Berlin conference (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

Bologna Process in Cameroon

Although the BP initially was conceived as a solution to challenges facing European education systems, the BP, nonetheless, has had a spill-over effect in other parts of the world, including Latin America, Asia and Africa (Knight, 2013; Vögtle & Martens, 2014). In Africa, for example, although individual countries such as Cameroon, are progressively shifting towards the Bologna model, some of these initiatives are positioned within sub-regional contexts including the Western, Eastern, Northern, Southern and Central African contexts. In this dissertation, I examined the spill-over effects of the BP on the Cameroonian HE as part of the Central African sub-regional context involving countries of the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC). CEMAC is made up of the Central African Republic, Chad, Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Cameroon. BP ideas were adopted in the CEMAC sub-region in 2005 by the CEMAC head of states in Libreville, Gabon, under the ‘Licence - master - doctorat’ (LMD) reform with the intention to create the CEMAC space for HE, research and professional training (Libreville Communiqué, 2005).

The Republic of Cameroon consists of 10 regions of which eight are French-speaking and two are English-speaking. This means Cameroon is a bilingual country. This bilingualism resulted from the simultaneous French and British colonial rule over Cameroon, following the defeat of Germany in World War I. French Cameroon gained independence in 1960 while British Cameroon became independent in 1961 and was reunited with French Cameroon, adopting both French and English as the country’s official languages. This bilingualism is also apparent in Cameroon’s operation of both the British and French models of education. For example, universities modelled on the French system offered multiple degrees, including Diplôme d’Études Universitaires Générales (DEUG), Licence, Maîtrise, Diplôme d’Études Approfondies (DEA), Doctorat de troisième cycle and Doctorat d’État (Eta, 2015; Eta & Vubo 2016). At the Anglo-Saxon university, there was

a three-level degree structure (Eta, 2015). Implementation of these BP objectives started in Cameroon in the 2007/2008 academic year.

Towards to theoretical framework of policy borrowing

Research has demonstrated the different patterns of how HE policies have been analysed to locate the role of various actors in decision-making. The basic question has been: Who defines the needs and functions of HE? The triangle of coordination (Clark, 1983) has been used extensively to analyse the coordination of HE systems and the role of different actors in HE governance. The triangle of coordination illustrates that HE is coordinated from three internal sources: state authority, the market and the academic oligarchy. However, globalization and increased external stakeholders' involvement in HE shows that HE systems are influenced also by the global environment which Clark's typology cannot address. Because of various kinds of interactions, national systems of education influence and are influenced by external forces. Such influences lead national education systems to learn and adopt policies from elsewhere. Thus, policy studies are increasingly taking a comparative approach, focusing on 'understanding the local policy contexts against the backdrop of larger transnational or global developments' (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, p. 4).

In my dissertation, I examined BP's influence on the Cameroonian HE system as a case of policy borrowing. Policy borrowing refers to the transnational flow of global policies. Policy borrowing, comprised two main stages: adoption and adaptation. Adoption focuses on the reasons for the cross-national attraction (Phillips and Ochs, 2004) or dissemination of global policies and practices and local encounters with the borrowed model (Steiner-Khamsi (2014). Adaptation refers to the translation of these borrowed reforms at the local level. In other words, the two stages focus on the question of why borrowing occurs and how what is borrowed is adapted in the local context. These two main stages can be further broken down into four sub-stages following Phillips and Ochs (2004) composite model of policy borrowing. These four stages include the cross-national attraction, the decision, the implementation and the internalisation/indigenisation stages.

The cross-national attraction stage highlights how the motivation to borrow may lead to the search for a foreign model and what to borrow. The decision stage refers to how what is borrowed is introduced in the national context and the measures that are taken to start the process of change. The implementation stage refers to how what is borrowed is adapted to contextual factors in the new system. Finally, internalisation/indigenisation relates to how the foreign model becomes internalised and absorbed in the borrower country. In this dissertation, the cross-national attraction and decision stages make up adoption while the implementation and internalisation/indigenisation stages constitute adaptation.

Dissertation task and methods

The aim of my dissertation was to use policy borrowing as a theoretical framework to examine the restructuring of the Cameroon HE system in line with the policy tools of the BP. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the reasons for the use of the Bologna Process (BP) ideas as a tool for higher education (HE) reforms in Cameroon?
2. How were these ideas introduced and disseminated to start the process of change in Cameroon, and what has been the local response to the adoption?
3. How have some of the lines of action in the Bologna Process been implemented in Cameroon, and what do they reveal about the use of borrowed policies at the local level?

Data comprised text documents and interviews. The documents were from three levels; the CEMAC regional, Cameroon national and the institutional (Universities) levels that were explicit about the Bologna adoption. Given that the adoption of BP reforms in the Cameroon HE system was part of the CEMAC regional initiative under the LMD reform, LMD documents at the CEMAC sub-regional level from 2004 to 2006 (those that were available online) were reviewed. These documents included the CEMAC heads of state declaration (2005), CEMAC recommendation (2005) and two CEMAC directives (2006a & 2006b). Documents produced by the Cameroonian Ministry of HE from 2006 to 2010 also were studied, with the objective of getting a general understanding of what the LMD system was about for Cameroon. Finally, documents produced by the universities, including the 2007 and 2008 BUN Newsletter, produced by the University of Buea, and explanatory notes on the different concepts related to the LMD, produced by University of Yaoundé I were studied. The documents were explicit on the rationale for adoption in the CEMAC region, including Cameroon, and were used as research material in Article I.

In addition, 62 interviews were conducted with policymakers, university administrators and lecturers from five state universities and the Cameroon Ministry of HE. A combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Neuman, 2004) was employed in the selection of interviewees. Interviewees were selected based on their knowledge of the LMD system and the system prior to the LMD in Cameroon. The policy borrowing framework was also part of the methodology, as the interview questions were formulated to capture the two key stages of policy borrowing, but also, considering the sub-division of those stages as presented by Phillips and Ochs (2004). Interview questions were formulated along four themes: (1) adoption of the LMD and external influences, (2) introduction and dissemination, (3) implementation and (4) general perceptions.

The data were mainly analyzed through thematic analysis with the aim to find some pattern within the data sets (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was useful for capturing complexities of meaning (Guest, et al., 2012), as well as interviewees' perceptions about the adoption and adaptation of BP ideas in Cameroon. The flexibility of the-

matic analysis allowed for both inductive/data-driven and deductive/theory-driven analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest et al., 2012). This study, as seen in the articles, makes use of both the inductive and deductive approaches, though in varying degrees.

Dissertation Structure: four articles

To answer the three research questions, four empirical articles were conducted. The aim of the first article was to investigate the reasons for BP adoption in the HE system of Cameroon. In the second article, given that BP ideas were first adopted at the CEMAC level, the aims were to analyse the process of transferring them from the CEMAC sub-regional level and their introduction into the national and institutional context of Cameroon and also, to examine local responses to the adoption. In the third article, the aim was to examine the adaptation of the degree structure and the credit system in the Anglo-Saxon and the French sub-systems of education in Cameroon and the factors that informed their adaptation. In the fourth article, the focus was on how graduate employability, as one of the objectives of the BP, was enhanced at universities in Cameroon. Data used for article one was based solely on text documents while for the second, third and fourth articles, data consisted of interviews and documents.

Main findings

With regards to the reasons for the adoption of the BP in Cameroon, the findings in article one revealed that the needs to meet international standards influenced adoption. The international standard motive (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000) is related to the political discourse associated with policy borrowing, especially that of the ‘fear of “falling behind” internationally’ (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 14). Such a reason for adoption implies that the ‘global’ solution was first adopted before the construction of the local problem. This study also indicated that the global solution fits well with the local problem, as adoption was seen as having the potential to resolve HE challenges in Cameroon, such as legitimising the harmonisation of the dual Anglo-Saxon and French systems of education in terms of the degree structure and grading system that will, in turn, enhance inter-university mobility.

This study, as presented in article two, demonstrated that BP ideas were introduced in Cameroon through a political decision by the head of state, as the decision was not discussed with the university community prior to adoption in 2005. This study provided evidence that the introduction of the LMD in Cameroonian universities was an imposition by the government on the universities, a finding that has been highlighted in relation to the introduction of the LMD in Africa (see Khelfoui, 2009). The formulation of text documents to guide the implementation and the organization of conferences and seminars were the main tools used in the dissemination of these ideas. The (international) conferences highlighted the international nature of the BP and were instrumental in the further

dissemination and marketing of BP ideas in general and the LMD in particular. By providing an international forum for the exchange of ideas and sharing of experiences among national and international actors, the international conference also served to emphasise that LMD was an ongoing process. There were diverse perceptions about adoption. While some interviewees viewed adoption as imposed or externally influenced by France (because the LMD also was used in France to refer to the BP reforms there), others saw it as voluntary (to harmonise HE in the area), and some were even uncertain whether it was voluntary or imposed. The lack of involvement by participants in the adoption process could explain the variation in perceptions.

This study indicated in article three that there were differences in the implementation of the degree structure and the credit system at the Anglo-Saxon and the French modelled universities. The results suggested that the adoption of BP ideas did not change the degree structure at the Anglo-Saxon university significantly because the Anglo-Saxon university in Cameroon operated on the bachelor's, master's and PhD degree system since its conception in 1993. Thus, the adoption was used to glorify and reinforce the degree structure at the Anglo-Saxon university. At the French-inspired universities, the LMD degree structure did not completely replace the existing structure, rather, the BP degree structure was modified to accommodate existing practices. Policy borrowing was used for legitimisation purposes as earlier attempts at harmonisation were highly contested. The adoption of the credit system reinforced practices at the Anglo-Saxon university in terms of the number of credits as the university operated on an earlier (but lesser number of credits at the different degree levels) version of the credit system. At the French-inspired universities, the credit system was introduced but was modified to accommodate the module and average system that was previously in place.

Article four highlighted that graduate employability was enhanced in Cameroonian universities through a combination of strategies under the catchword 'professionalization' – that is, preparing students with skills and competencies for specific professions. Conceptualized as professionalization, the LMD system did not bring completely new elements into the employability agenda of universities. Since their creation in the 1960s, professionalization was one of the missions of universities. Thus, the implementation of the employability agenda demonstrated that policy borrowing was used more as a reference, in which the adoption did not bring in completely new aspects with regard to the employability agenda. Rather, policy borrowing merely inspired local reforms and solutions that were already embedded within the system, however using the BP for legitimisation purposes.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings in this dissertation, based on the four articles drew attention to how the BP, a European model of harmonisation, spread beyond Europe influencing HE reforms in Cameroon. The four articles provided insight into why BP ideas were adopted, how they were adapted, and the changes that were brought about in Cameroon

as a result. In other words, the four articles discussed the adoption (article 1 & 2) and adaptation (articles 3 & 4) of BP ideas in the HE system of Cameroon. The adoption and adaptation of BP ideas in the Cameroonian HE system started from a cross-regional initiative to create the CEMAC space for HE, research and professional training through the LMD system as adopted in the Libreville Declaration (2005). The cross-regional nature of the adoption of Bologna principles in Cameroon has implications for the processes involved in policy borrowing, as captured by Phillips and Ochs (2004). There is a need to broaden the existing policy borrowing framework that takes into account the different processes of policy borrowing at the regional and national level, a task that my dissertation also contributed to.

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