

Is Europe the Gold Standard?

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There is an assumption among scholars of regionalism and European higher education studies that Europe's Bologna Process is *the* model to emulate for regional cooperation in the higher education sector. This assumption is not without context. 'Bologna' is indeed a very well recognised brand both within and beyond the borders of Europe; the cooperation achieved thus far for constructing the European Higher Education Area is unparalleled. But does this mean that other regions¹ embrace the Bologna Process as the Gold Standard for how to 'do' higher education cooperation?

The short answer is: no.

In my on-going research comparing higher education policy cooperation in Europe and in Southeast Asia, I found very little support for the above 'Bologna Process export thesis'.² I derived my conclusion after interviewing policy actors in Southeast Asia and Europe (more than 50 in-depth interviews have been completed), participating in two policy dialogues for the project 'European Union Support for Higher Education in ASEAN Region' (SHARE), and analysing policy documents and published academic studies on policy cooperation in the two regions. I focussed on identifying and explaining the features of the two regional higher education policy cooperation.

This is what I found: both regions shared similar policy ideas of how to 'do' higher education cooperation—increasing political cooperation in the higher education sector, deepening networks between tertiary institutions, and promoting student mobility.³ But they did so very differently. In Southeast Asia, participating states concentrated on allocating authority to distinct institutional venues, which involved generally different audiences (e.g. policymakers, university administrators). By contrast, participating states in Europe focussed on discussing and selecting aspects of regional higher education policy cooperation they considered legitimate for action; what this amounted to were substantive policy measures in which the members were invited to implement.

¹ By regions, I generally refer to macro-regions (e.g. 'Europe', 'Asia', 'Africa') and associated developments.

² For more information, please see Chou, Meng-Hsuan and Pauline Ravinet (2017) 'Higher education regionalism in Europe and Southeast Asia: Comparing policy ideas', *Politics & Society* 36(1): 143-159.

³ What led me to refute the 'Bologna Process export thesis' is that some states in Southeast Asia were already trying to implement these ideas before the Bologna Process was launched and there was also an explicit rejection to follow the Bologna 'method' when the states sought to deepen their cooperation in the higher education sector.

Similarly, I found the extant models of regional cooperation to be very influential in how the policy actors pursue higher education policy cooperation; this was the case even though many of the initial political decisions to start such cooperation were taken outside of the extant regional institutional framework. For instance, efforts to relaunch European integration in the 1980s after ‘Euro-sclerosis’ gave birth to the Erasmus programme, and the new European governance approach defined how the Bologna Process would be put into practice. For Southeast Asia, the ‘ASEAN Way’ instilled the principle of non-interference on national affairs and non-confrontational consultation, which ultimately led to the establishment and endurance of two distinct platforms for higher education cooperation in the region: the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development (RIHED).

My findings offer two insights to understanding regionalism and internationalisation in other world regions. First, they confirm that the discourse about the importance of knowledge economy and society has paved the way for increased higher education regionalisms around the world. While the European Commission and the European Union have often been identified as the amplifiers of this knowledge discourse, I saw actors in both regions, inside and outside of the higher education sector, with or without policymaking powers, championing this discourse. While the policy actors did interpret and use the knowledge discourse differently—some emphasising the economic aspects, others stressing its social inclusion potential—the discourse was never ignored. In Europe, the knowledge discourse enabled the bringing together of the Bologna Process and the Europe of Knowledge (including developments concerning the European Research Area), both espousing different aspects of this discourse. In Southeast Asia, the knowledge discourse was the hook on which higher education policy cooperation was made feasible in a region where non-intervention was the norm.

Second, my findings revealed the different ways in which policy actors in both regions decided to translate ideas of higher education regionalism into practice, which ultimately affect how their cooperation is perceived inside and outside of their geographical regions. For instance, when European actors use the term ‘higher education area’ and ‘Bologna’, they are generally referring to further building upon agreed objectives. The implication of this approach is brand recognition: my interviewees easily invoked ‘Erasmus’ or ‘Bologna’ when asked about the policy vision of European higher education regionalism. By contrast, the more recent usage of ‘common space’ in Southeast Asia is an attempt to articulate and make sense of the long-standing differences between regional policy actors. Specifically, ‘common space’ refers to the multiplicity of existing higher education regional measures and governance structures rather than their simplification. This final observation indicates that, while the Bologna Process may not be the Gold Standard for higher education cooperation elsewhere, policy actors around the world are certainly attentive and informed about its evolution.