

Tamás Kozma, Magdolna Rébay, Andrea Óhidy & Éva Szolár (Eds.): The Bologna Process in Central and Eastern Europe. Studies in International Comparative Educational Science. Wiesbaden: Springer. 2014. pp. 377.

The authors in this volume engage with the “Bologna process” and its configuration and reception in a variety of Central and Eastern European countries such as Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and the Ukraine. From a rather technical point of view, this idea implies in the first place a structural harmonisation of the higher education degrees in order to ensure employability, mobility across Europe, European cooperation and higher education quality. From a more substantial point of view, the Bologna process raises a series of questions of a political, philosophical and pedagogical nature that are related to the very essence of the harmonisation or the Europeanization method. From this point of view, the volume stands out as a critical questioning of a policy development. Thus, it is in line with much of the contemporary comparative work, which is not only descriptively oriented but also, and more significantly, theoretically and critically driven. This collection of essays calls into question the concept of policy transfer and borrowing, though sometimes in a rather implicit way. By its very nature, the Bologna process challenges European regional identities, of Central and Eastern European minority cultures, and the highly sensitive issue of minority rights protection in the area. Therefore, a reflection upon the nature of this process as diffusion or as translation does not represent a mere “technical” choice.

In this sense, the introduction by Horner and the two opening chapters by Kozma and Tomusk are setting the scene specifically from a critical and theoretical perspective. These contributors substantially engage with the underlying premises and with its consequences from a substantial point of view, which means from the standpoint of a culturally specific European space.

In his opening chapter, Kozma characterises Bologna as essentially a political process, whose main actors are the governments and their “buffer organisations”. In his words, “governments which are drifting between the search for a national identity of the 1990s and the EU integration in the 2000s, use the Bologna process for their own purposes in the region” (p. 22). The argument put forward is that minority higher education, “owned by and referring to the needs of certain ethnic communities or Church institutions of the region” (Kozma, p. 23) are neglected and thus at risk. A separatist idea versus an integration scenario of such minority higher education institutions within their national system of education appear both risky. In Kozma’s view, a third scenario with an integration into an alternative higher education network may respond to the challenges that Bologna raises through their accreditation system while also preserving the political role of minority universities. However, this solution may be a politically sensitive issue, depending upon the very nature of these networks and the agreements between the parts involved.

The chapter by Tomusk goes deeper into the analysis of the relationship between culture and politics, through an original account of three visions such as those attributed to

Gellner, Malinowski and Wittgenstein. The choice is between an “escape from culture” solution following Wittgenstein, or a separation between culture and politics as suggested by Malinowski. Tomusk’s post-national choice is pragmatically oriented: universities are not called anymore to play the national political symbols. Unlike in Kozma’s chapter, these are less culturally-oriented institutions, and more economically driven institutions. In his words, this dilemma is to be solved by “severing the connection between culture and politics, and neutralising universities by means of pushing them from the political to the economic realm” (p. 60).

The series of chapters that follows, written as national case studies, is of a more descriptive type. Their strength lies in their uniform structuring that allows for comparison. Most of them include several key sections such as the restructuring process, the relationship to the labour market and the economy, the lifelong learning component and the internationalisation process.

One common finding to these countries is some sort of superficial implementation or uncritical acceptance of a single vision such as that represented by the Bologna process in the restructuring of the higher education sector. Another common finding is the difficulty to perceive the shorter university degrees (the bachelor of 3, 3.5 years) as worthy of social prestige, for instance in Poland as is the case in other western European contexts. However, as revealed by Kwieck’s study, data from the labour market demonstrates that in Poland the first university cycle on the Bologna model has been increasingly accepted in practical terms and the returns to education at this level are significant.

Another interesting finding from the chapter on Croatia is the recognition of informal and non-formal learning though credit allocation (the unique case of the University of Rijeka) as well as the recognition of prior learning by including it into the Croatian qualification. The same emerges in the chapter on the Czech higher education where we can read that it represents a “required change in the attitude” from the higher education institution. Clearly, a radical transformation of the higher education offer may well represent a challenge to the way these institutions have been originally conceived as less flexible and mainly oriented toward fresh secondary school graduates. Another trend across various countries (i.e. Slovenia, Serbia) is a focus on students and the social dimension of higher education, in line with the Prague declaration in 2001. The social dimension implicit in various European policy documents and actions is at the same time equity oriented and social cohesion upholding, as a necessary counterbalance to economic aims such as employability.

The volume is intellectually challenging when considering the role of European universities between, on the one hand, traditionally political and cultural purposes and, on the other hand, new economic and social cohesion aims both within and between European countries. At the same time, it is a valid source of information about the characteristics of the “Bologna process” in Central and Eastern countries. It emerges that as a policy of convergence, the Bologna process involves adaptations and local processes of

indigenisation. In fact, and in line with the findings of this volume, Verdier (2013) considers that we assist at growing hybridisation of national models, at least in the lifelong learning and vocational education provisions. In addition, Méhaut (2013) shows how in three Western European contexts the Bologna process and other structural developments of the education systems are all “consistent with their internal logics rather than borrowing from other systems” (p. 112), and that internal hybridisation appears to be more significant than between system’s hybridisation. Therefore, this volume is as a major comparative resource that offers to its readers important critical lenses that both informs and questions the direction and the meaning of the European higher education politics.

References

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