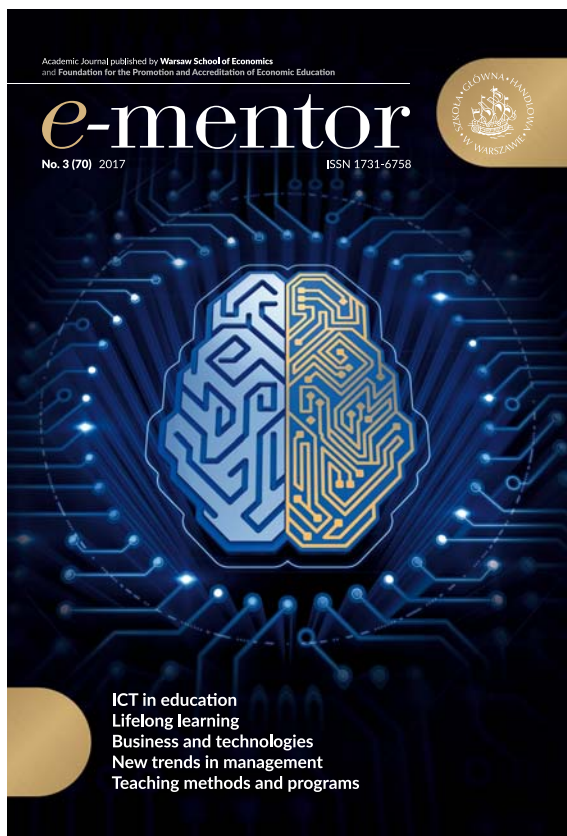


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Degree reforms in Scandinavian higher education – intersection between Europeanization and national policies

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European higher education (HE) systems have undergone extensive reforms over the last two decades to keep pace with globalization processes and increased competition. Some were initiated by national governments, whereas others were the result of joint European initiatives. Among the most prominent European policies is the Bologna Process. Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process aimed at establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. One of its core objectives was the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees. In this article, the intersection between European and national HE policies and processes is considered. The extent of Europeanization versus domestic pressures is examined, with a focus on degree structure reforms in the three Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

The following is asked: To what extent were the Scandinavian degree reforms European- or domestic-driven? For the analysis of Europeanization vs. national motivations behind the degree structure changes, a definition of Europeanization within HE is applied. Within this definition, the Bologna Process is identified as an intergovernmental, weakly obligating, Europeanization process with an impact on EU and non-EU countries (Musselin, 2009, p. 184). The choice of degree reforms is motivated by its central role in the Bologna Reforms. The focus on the Scandinavian countries is due to their historical, cultural, and linguistic similarities as well as their relatively similar development as welfare societies in which education plays a central role. The study draws on an analytical framework with a focus on the Europeanization of public policy (Vukasović, 2012, p. 211). Within this context, attention is given to how European initiatives accommodate national settings through external incentives, social learning, and lesson-drawing mechanisms (Vukasović, 2013, p. 315). European and domestic motivations, as well as Europeanization process mechanisms, are examined through an analysis of Bologna documents, national reports, and publicly accessible official records, such as legal and other types of documentary material. The study maps the rationales and practices of the degree reform for each country, providing a comparison drawing from the theoretical framework of Europeanization mechanisms.

The article is structured as follows: “Europeanization processes” discusses the definitions and theoretical framework of mechanisms of Europeanization with a focus on HE. “Degree structure reform” illustrates the degree structure reform and its implementation in Scandinavia. Finally, the level of Europeanization vs. national influence is analyzed in “Europeanization mechanism models”.

Europeanization processes

Europeanization is generally defined in the literature as the domestic impact of the EU (Sedelmeier, 2011). However, the definition may be elaborated to include processes developed by supranational or intergovernmental bodies that affect EU as well as non-EU countries (Musselin, 2009, p. 183). Three steps are essential to Europeanization: there must be some degree of ‘misfit’ (1) between European level and domestic level processes, which would lead to adaptation pressure (2); and various actors must react to the adaptation pressure (3).

Europeanization of HE

Europeanization of HE occurs when HE systems and organizations adapt to pressures coming from European HE initiatives (Vukasović, 2013, p. 312). These may produce changes to national HE policies, generate mutual interactive processes between domestic and European level, or provide legitimization for domestic policies. Dakowska (Dakowska, 2015, p. 138) points to the strategic usage of European frameworks and recommendations by national policy makers. Vice versa, negative Europeanization as a reaction to European initiatives may arise.

Three models of Europeanization mechanisms are suggested (Vukasović, 2012, p. 213): an external incentive model, a social learning model - these two often being complementary - and a lesson-drawing model. The Europeanization mechanism models presented in Table 1 are modified to also reflect non-EU processes, such as the Bologna Process (Melo, 2016, p.61). The external incentive model assumes a logic of consequence. HE entities will adopt European policy if the benefit is estimated to exceed the cost, or if the costs

Table 1. Europeanization mechanism models

Model	Principal actor	Hypotheses
External incentives	EU	European rules are adopted if the benefits of rewards exceed the adaptation costs, or if the costs of non-compliance are deemed too high.
Social learning	EU	European rules are adopted if the actors are persuaded of their appropriateness.
Lesson-drawing	Government/institution	European rules are adopted if they are expected to solve national policy problems effectively.

Source: M. Vukasović (2012), p. 215.

of non-compliance are deemed too high. In the social learning model, the actors will need to be persuaded into following the European policy through a process of collective learning (Börzel & Risse, 2003, p. 66). Rules must be deemed legitimate by the actors in their content or the process in which they were developed. In this respect, the Bologna Process has been criticized for the lack of participation of academic staff in the development of its rules (Vukasović, 2012, p. 216). Finally, in the lesson-drawing model, European policy is adopted if it serves a national agenda.

Launched in 1999, the Bologna Process provides a means of mainstreaming HE activities towards similar overarching policies. External legitimacy challenges often lead national HE systems to policy emulation (Dobbins & Knill, 2017, p. 68). In this respect, the Bologna Process provides a platform for overcoming national opposition to HE reforms. Nonetheless, other considerations may be in play in the process. The Bologna Process is non-legally-binding, without specific incentives or direct consequences in the event of non-compliance, apart from scorecards in stocktaking reports; as such, it does not comply with the legal coercion mechanism. Rather, norms, guidelines, and standards have been introduced and incorporated into national systems through a transnational soft governance regime, although other EU initiatives promote the implementation of Bologna objectives. These entail wide-ranging policy objectives within HE. The focus of this research is solely on the degree structure reform, although similar phenomena were observed in the implementation of other Bologna objectives (Schmidt, 2017). Research suggests significant convergence of rhetoric and objectives alongside consistent divergent national policy instrumentation and outcomes (Vukasović & Huisman, 2017, pp. 1–19).

Degree Structure Reform

The declared purpose of the Bologna 3+2+3-degree objective was to improve employability and student mobility and increase international competitiveness (European Ministers of Education, Bologna Declaration, accessed May 7, 2016). Implementation of the degree reform was confronted within national contexts, with each country approaching the reform at its own pace and according to domestic agenda. Highly controversial, the degree reform was often criticized for overproducing HE graduates who are,

on the one hand, 'lightweight academics' and, on the other, compete against vocationally-trained workers who are desperately needed by employers. However, against public criticism, findings show that graduates with general and applied sciences Bachelors' degrees end up in occupations with higher earnings and prestige (Neugebauer & Weiss, 2017, p.25). Nonetheless, a consensus on the three-cycle degree structure has been achieved, and Bologna objectives of facilitating international activities within Europe and increasing global competitiveness have gained ground (Hunter, 2015, p.105).

Degree structure reform in Scandinavia

By 2007, the Bologna degree structure was fully implemented in Scandinavia. However, the reforms were approached at a different pace and with different reasoning, as varied national contexts led to various reactions to the adaptation pressures (Table 2). Denmark had begun reforming its one-cycle degree some years before signing the Bologna Declaration. In fact, the Bachelor's degree was introduced in Denmark as early as 1988, though with little success, as the vast majority of students continued on to Master's studies, and employment showed little interest in the new degree. In 1993, the 3+2+3-degree structure was introduced, a process first finalized with the 2003 legislation. Traditional Danish professional degrees were included within the first cycle, thus adding some form of flexible transition between programs.

Sweden began its degree reform at a later stage than Denmark, as it was the general conception that the Swedish modular credit system already incorporated most Bologna features (Lindberg-Sand, 2007, p. 7). Later concerns for the compatibility of Swedish degrees led, in 2002, to a review of the degree structure. The conclusions were distributed among HE institutions (HEIs) for comments. On February 2006, the government bill "New world – new university" was adopted by Parliament. Once approved, the implementation process was rapid. By 7/2007 all students were enrolled in the three cycle degrees.

In Norway, discussions regarding the duration of degrees have been ongoing since the 1980s (Vaboe & Aamodt, 2009, p.61). In 1998 the Mjøs Committee was appointed to review HE, and in 2001 a White Paper was submitted. In 2003, a comprehensive HE 'Quality Reform' was launched with the goal of improving the quality of HE and implementing the Bologna degree

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Table 2. Conditions for Europeanization Process

	Level of misfit	Reaction to adaptation pressures
DK	Three-cycle degree structure introduced prior to Bologna not fully implemented.	Introduction of new HE law without further discussion or debate.
SE	No degree structure planned prior to Bologna.	Four-year process prior introduction of new degree structure. Swift implementation.
NO	General HE reform initiated prior to Bologna. Bologna degree structure was incorporated.	Two-year debate before a decision on the reform. Medium/lengthy period of implementation.

Source: BFUG 2007 national reports Denmark, Sweden, Norway, <http://www.ehea.info/pid34367/implementation-and-national-reports.html>.

structure (Nielsen & Andreasen, 2015, p. 104). The reform was the result of governmental influence on HE, but also of European processes (Faegerlind & Stroemqvist, 2004, p. 212).

To sum up, in all three countries the conditions for Europeanization have been identified. Where low levels of misfit existed, the reaction to adaptation pressures was fast and there was little debate. High levels of misfit detected in Sweden and Norway led to slower responses to adaptation pressures. A closer examination is required to determine the Europeanization models operating in the processes.

Europeanization mechanism models

Analysis of the Europeanization mechanism models applied (Table 3) indicates that the lesson-drawing mechanism was used in Denmark and Norway, as the Bologna Process helped bring a national reform agenda to completion. In Sweden, on the other hand, the external incentive mechanism was primarily applied, as the reform was a result of concerns for recognition of Swedish degrees. Three main concerns triggered the reform in Denmark: the lengthy duration of HE studies, and, as a result, the delay in transition into employment; a high drop-out rate; and the need to internationalize Danish HE. Denmark's implementation of the Bologna Process was a strategic conformity, as it provided the opportunity to finalize the process of internationalizing HE degrees with a view to recognition, mobility, and attractiveness. In parallel, other reforms were enacted targeting governance, accountability, and financing, yet these remained separate from the Bologna reforms.

Sweden did not have an urgent domestic need to reorganize its degree system, as it already had short-time vocational programs in place to meet labor market needs (Ahola, Hedmo, Thomsen, & Vaboe, 2014, accessed April 5, 2016). It was only at a later stage that concerns for potential problems with international recognition of Swedish degrees, particularly its Masters' degrees, led to the reorganization of HE programs according to the Bologna degree structure. Before the degree structure change, Swedish HE was based on a modular structure with the course as the core entity of all programs. The main arguments for the Swedish "New world – new university" reform were internationalization and comparability. Further

arguments included the promotion of student mobility and recognition of Swedish HE abroad, widening participation, promotion of employability of Swedish graduates, and competitiveness.

Despite its outsider position within regarding the EU, Norway was relatively quick to adopt the Bologna Process to take part in the education market. The Quality Reform, already set in motion before Bologna, provided a platform on which Europeanization trends could be incorporated into national change and provide a solution to domestic problems. At the core of the reform was the recommendation to give students increased rights in terms of course quality and financing of studies, and at the same time define students' obligations more clearly regarding progress and completion of studies (Faegerlind & Stroemqvist, 2004). Though previously present in HE policies, internationalization was first put at the forefront of Norwegian HE policy in the Quality Reform (Gornitzka, 2007). The former six-year (4+2) degree structure was perceived as rather time-excessive and costly for Norwegian society. Another problem was the relatively high average age of a student at graduation. By 2003, therefore, the Norwegian degree structure was ready for a change. The Mjøs Commission's conclusions were that shorter degrees would reduce drop-out rates and shorten the study period of degrees. Both issues were linked to the length of the degree and its structure. Several degree cycle alternatives were reviewed in the report, and the Bologna degree cycle was recommended. Furthermore, in its report, the Commission also emphasized the international perspective of the degree reform. Finally, the need for shorter degrees was reviewed in the light of lifelong learning. Globalization and progress require that people renew their competencies during their course of their lives. In such a setting, shorter degrees are more meaningful than long degrees. In the public debate, the Ministry highlighted the continental roots of the Quality Reform, but also the need to internationalize HE and contribute to the efforts of establishing the EHEA. Bologna provided an external reference point with an authoritative status for degree structure reform and helped simplify the choice between a range of possible solutions. The translation of a Europeanization process, in this case, was characterized by national policy makers using the European agenda as a menu of solutions for domestic problems.

Table 3. Europeanization mechanism models in Scandinavian degree reform

	External incentives	Social learning	Lesson drawing
DK	Comparability-secondary		European reform used to complete national reform
SE	Comparability-main	Discussion with HEIs.	
NO	Comparability-secondary	Discussion with HEIs.	European reform helped set the course for degree reform

Source: Author's study.

The convergence to European norms in terms of degree structure change resulted in the following outcomes: Danish HE remained relatively segmented, though some level of flexibility improved, particularly in the transition from professional programs. Short professional programs were integrated into the first cycle, thus opening some room for future transitions to more advanced degrees. Sweden, on the other hand, transformed its modular system to the more rigid three cycle system. Emphasis was previously put on the complete course, whereas after the reform focus shifted to the full degree, thus reducing some of the system's flexibility. Finally, in Norway, the new degree system enabled open transition between institutions and programs. Moreover, short programs were integrated into the first cycle, and holders of short-cycle qualifications gained full credit for their previous studies when continuing their education in the same field towards a Bachelor's degree.

According to the multiplier effect model, increased flexibility within educational institutions is most effective as concerns the educational prospects of second-generation immigrant youth, as they tend to take more advantage of structural features and indirect routes than their native counterparts. Consistent with the immigrant paradox theory, persons with an immigrant background are either over-represented or very close to an equitable representation in all three Scandinavian countries. However, a closer examination of participation trends within the cycles may suggest more complex participation patterns for immigrants and descendants.

Conclusion

In this paper, Scandinavian degree reforms have been explored. It may be concluded that the implementation of a new degree structure in Scandinavian HE was the result of various national agendas combined with the need to conform to Bologna standards. Each country's starting point and the level of misfit between the European reform and national policies determined the pace and process. A low level of misfit enabled a swift implementation of the reform and vice versa. Nonetheless, by 2007, all three had finalized their degree reform.

Europeanization in Norway, and even more in Denmark, served in part as a tool to reinforce ongoing domestic processes (Vaboe, & Aamodt, 2009, pp.

57–71). In such a setting, the lesson-drawing mechanism was applied. Nonetheless, in both countries, internationalization and European comparability played a significant role. In Sweden, on the other hand, the Bologna reform was the trigger for a degree structure change, which was otherwise not on the domestic agenda. Here, the external incentive model mechanism was applied as the need for comparability and the concern around future lack of recognition were the key reform rationale. This may explain the relatively late Swedish reaction. Coupled with the external incentive mechanism, the social learning model was applied to provide consensus for the reforms.

In sum, Europeanization processes in HE are adopted at a higher pace when domestic considerations are the primary rationale for the reform. Nonetheless, in all three countries, the reforms were also highly driven by the need to conform to European standards. Other objectives of the Bologna reforms may be reviewed to further the understanding of the mechanisms behind domestic versus Europeanization policies in HE policies.

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Degree reforms in Scandinavian higher education – intersection between Europeanization and national policies

European higher education (HE) systems have undergone wide-scale reforms during the first two decades of the millennium. Some were the result of national policies; others were the result of Europeanization and globalization processes. The purpose of this article is to further the understanding of the mechanisms operating at the intersection between national policies and the Europeanization processes in HE. The article focuses on the Bologna degree structure reform and its implementation in the Scandinavian countries.

At first, Europeanization definitions and related theories are reviewed, with emphasis on HE. The degree reform in Scandinavian HE is described and analyzed in the context of Europeanization reforms and national policies. Then, national approaches in the context of Europeanization perspectives are examined through a comparison of reform reasoning in Bologna and national documents and related articles. The analysis indicates that where national agenda was in accordance with Europeanization procedures, the implementation pace was higher, although eventually all three countries fully implemented the reform.

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