

5 Decentring European higher education governance

The construction of expertise in the Bologna Process

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Introduction

Higher education governance was constructed as a decentred policy sector. On the one hand, the EU merely plays a supportive role while the member states retain their formal prerogatives over this policy area. On the other hand, according to the principle of university autonomy, government intervention in the universities' organisational, financial and academic functioning should be limited. In practice, states still regulate the higher education (HE) sector. Meanwhile, since the launch of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Commission has played an increasing role in supporting and directly participating in the formally intergovernmental Bologna Process.

This contribution will shed light on higher education governance in Europe, and especially how the European Commission (Commission) strategically attempts to shape a policy area in which it formally has few prerogatives through supporting stakeholder organisations and experts groups. The Commission's efforts at 'governing from a distance' (Epstein, 2005) is meant to encourage national authorities to pursue the implementation of HE reforms. Through the material, political and symbolic support it provides to reformist groups and individuals, the Commission seeks to generate its own clientele, and to legitimate professional networks that will promote European schemes at the domestic level. While much has been said on the emergence of a European HE policy (Bache, 2006; Kehm et al., 2009; Capano and Piattoni, 2011) and on policy implementation on the domestic level (Stastna, 2001; Rozsnyai, 2003; Witte, 2006; Gornitzka, 2007; Yagci 2010), decentring the analytical focus on the brokers that act as intermediaries between the EU and domestic level offers a more refined view of HE governance.

The case of European higher education policy seems well-suited to a decentred analytical perspective since it involves a variety of actors who struggle over the legitimate interpretation of the purpose and nature of HE reforms. As the decentred approach to governance rejects the reification of concepts such as the state or nation – but also less aggregated notions such as stakeholders or experts – it is a good fit for the European political space – and to the so-called European

Higher Education Area. Both of them appear to be, par excellence, ‘constructed, transnational, differentiated and discontinuous’ (Bevir, 2013, p. 13). One particularly insightful aspect of the interpretative approach is its focus on the emergence of a dominant discourse and its use by hegemonic groups. As Frank Fischer argues,

the creation of social knowledge and power are intimately linked. To act together, a human community must come to some agreement on what vision of reality it will accept as both factually correct and normatively legitimate. Such rhetorical closure on the definition of reality establishes the foundation of social order.

(Fischer, 1995, pp. 208–209)

and allows some groups to take precedence over others. Following this logic, European higher education policy results from a ‘co-evolution of supranational and inter-governmental policy initiatives marked by power struggles, competition, and strategic convergence’ (Dakowska and Serrano-Velarde, 2018, p. 261).

Education policies are coproduced by actors situated at different levels. My contribution to this area of study focuses on expert groups that are not exclusively Brussels-based. To understand the complex governance of HE, it is important to take into account both the European dimension (funds, programmes and working groups) and the domestic dimension, and in the process to grasp the relationship between the expert groups at the EU level and the national policy-making system. Although they act primarily at the domestic level, the Bologna experts are financed by EU funds. As my comparative analysis of the French, Polish and Ukrainian cases shows, while they might potentially serve as mediators between the European Commission (DG Education and Culture and its executive agency) and the domestic level, their policy leverage varies dramatically.

The empirical cases analysed in greater detail here focus on a group of experts that has been launched and supported by the European Commission: the Bologna Experts (in the EU member states), also called Higher Education Reform Experts (in the EU neighbourhood). From the perspective of HE governance in Europe, these academic experts can first be considered as brokers between domestic and European political fields. Second, comparison between the three country cases shows significant difference in the practices and policy positions of these individuals and thus stresses the need to decentre the analytical perspective on the Bologna Process. Far from driving policy convergence, the process should be understood in terms of its diversity, including the historical conditions of each country’s membership in relation to the EU.¹

This contribution contrasts with the bulk of research on HE governance in several ways. First, instead of focusing exclusively on the EU or the domestic level, the focus on the meso-level of policy brokers helps us refine the analytical

conceptualisation of the relations between the Commission and its so-called stakeholders. Second, it tries to refine the usually top-down oriented Europeanisation studies and suggests a bottom-up, dynamic and sociological approach. Manja Klemenčič (2013) defines Europeanisation as a policy adaptation and examines 'to what extent national policy developments reflect the European recommendations on institutional diversification' (p. 120). Instead of apprehending HE reforms as a unilateral adaptation to an external constraint, as the literature on Europeanisation and policy diffusion calls us to (Börzel and Risse, 2000), I propose to examine the relations between the European institutions and national academic spaces in their reciprocity, focusing both on actors and on their practices. In doing so, I follow a sociological and constructivist approach of the European political field (Georgakakis, 2012; Guiraudon and Favel, 2011) as it interacts with domestic political arenas. The political sociology approach to the EU that has been developed over the last decade adopts a bottom-up perspective as it sheds light empirically and inductively on actor configurations and power relations in the construction of public 'problems' (Rowell and Mangenot, 2010).

This chapter is based on empirical fieldwork carried out in Poland, France, Germany and Ukraine as well as in Brussels. It includes the analysis of different types of documents related to the reforms (legal acts, published and unpublished reports, communications and press articles) and 85 semi-structured interviews conducted with educational experts, representatives of the academic community and top civil servants at national, European and international levels (European Commission, Council of Europe, OECD, UNESCO).² Consultation of the Council of Europe and UNESCO archives complemented the empirical part of the research.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first consider the evolution of European higher education governance and the changing role of the European Commission. Second, I reflect on the role and uses of expertise in European higher education governance and outline how the European Commission tends to structure its environment and 'clientele' in HE matters and how it shapes the Bologna Experts group. Third, I present a more detailed and collective portrait of the Bologna Experts in France, Poland and the Ukraine and reflect on their domestic policy leverage.

European higher education governance and the Bologna Process

The rise of a European HE policy must be situated in a broader international context characterised by the involvement of international organisations such as the OECD, the Council of Europe, UNESCO and the World Bank in this sector (Martens et al., 2007; Dakowska and Serrano-Velarde, 2018). Education has only become a subject of scrutiny in EU policy-making analysis relatively recently (Jakobi et al., 2009, since it wasn't historically an area of Community

intervention. Still, closer examination reveals a historical interest in the education field among Community representatives, followed by a growing involvement of the Commission, prompted by the opportunities offered by the Maastricht and Lisbon Treaties.

The progressive emergence of a European higher education policy

Although under the Treaty of Rome member state governments formally retained their legal competences in educational policies, the Commission took a number of initiatives based on its competence in vocational education (art. 128). At the beginning of the European integration process, attempts were already made to set up a European university (Corbett, 2005; Croché, 2010). The European University Institute in Florence was initiated in 1972, while in 1974 a Resolution of the Ministers of Education established a division for higher education within the Commission's Directorate-General for Research, Science and Education and laid out some principles of intergovernmental cooperation in the field (Neave 1984). Since 1986 the Commission has promoted mobility through its Erasmus programme. It has worked at introducing a 'European Dimension in Higher Education' with its Jean Monnet actions as well as the Tempus programmes. The Treaty of Maastricht (1992) recognised education as an area of EU competence, stating that the EU

shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems.

(art. 126, later art. 165.1 of TFUE)

This specified and further legitimised the EU's action in the field, as the Commission was allowed to back member state initiatives (Dakowska and Serrano-Velarde, 2018). Within the Commission, policy entrepreneurs made efforts to secure a 'Community competence for the non-Treaty sector of education' (Corbett, 2005, p. 155). The idea that higher education was to produce a highly skilled workforce, just as vocational training did, was the foundation of Commission activism in the 1980s and in the following decades. This clarifies why Commission representatives consider the Bologna Process and the Lisbon strategy's educational provisions as two sides of the same coin.

The Bologna Process, launched in 1999 as an intergovernmental initiative of 29 countries, was first a voluntary process that aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area by strengthening student mobility, harmonising degrees and promoting quality assurance. The Bologna Process has inspired numerous research programmes on the Europeanisation of higher education (HE) (Amaral et al., 2009; Dale and Robertson, 2009; Curaj et al., 2012). These studies have

turned academic attention to the domestic level, looking at diverse adaptations of the intergovernmental Bologna Process recommendations in different contexts.

The launch of the Lisbon Strategy (2000) appears to have been a turning point for European higher education policies, which became explicitly connected to economic and social objectives (Capano and Piattoni, 2011). In Lisbon, the European Council called on Europe to become 'the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (Lisbon European Council, 2000). While the link between education, research and economic development was a constant in the European Commission's approach to the sector, the launch of the Lisbon Strategy led to the introduction of a new method (the Open Method of Coordination) in which the member states had to report on their progress towards meeting common goals. Also, the discursive link between higher education and employability had since become much more explicit in the Commission's documents. Cussó's (2008) lexicometric analysis shows that the term 'knowledge society' reflected a socio-economic paradigm enhanced by terms such as 'work', 'employment' and 'skills', which revealed the Commission's priority of 'education's adaptation to the job market needs by developing strategic skills and by the increasing of private investments' (Cussó 2008, p. 51). Under the Juncker Commission, in office since 2014, 'skills' have been transferred from the Directorate-general for Education and Culture to the DG for Employment, Social affairs and Inclusion (DG EMPL), which further illustrates this logic.³ The New Skills Agenda, which refers to educational matters, was elaborated by DG EMPL.

The launch of the Lisbon Strategy put mounting pressure on the intergovernmental Bologna Process. Kathia Serrano-Velarde (2014) has shown how the slogan of a European 'knowledge economy' promoted by the Lisbon Strategy has been strategically used by EC officials to enhance the Commission's visibility in this field. Formally, the intergovernmental Bologna Process differs from the EU schemes both legally and geographically as it encompasses a wide range of states that are not EU members, especially post-Soviet countries. Still, the European Commission has played an increasingly active role in supporting and directly participating in the Bologna Process (Bache, 2006; Keeling, 2006). This became clear in 2003, when the Commission was invited to join the board of the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG). On the one hand, some attempts were made by national representatives, especially in the initial phase, to defend the autonomy of the Bologna Process, which led a few authors to describe the process as a case of 'resisting the EU' (Muller and Ravinet, 2008). However, these attempts seem to be limited to a few individual country representatives and do not reflect a broad ideological convergence between the Commission representatives and most stakeholders and country representatives. Their material resources, but also the dependence of the stakeholders, have increased due to the

Commission's lavish financial support. By supporting the stakeholder groups and the activities of the Bologna Process (conferences, meetings, reports) so generously, the Commission contributes to the material existence of the process. In this context, two intertwined Commission strategies can be mentioned. The first strategy is a discursive, rhetorical and political takeover of the Bologna Process. The second one consists in funding applied research and expert groups in order to deepen and speed up the process.

The Commission's discursive and material colonisation of the Bologna Process

In the policy discourse produced by the Commission, the intergovernmental specificity and autonomy of the Bologna Process tend to be denied insofar as the Bologna Process is presented as a complement to the Lisbon Strategy and to the Copenhagen Process, which focuses on vocational education. The Commission representatives claim their authority in policy areas that have been discussed within the Bologna framework such as quality assurance or the qualification frameworks. This creates tensions, as other participants in the Bologna Process, including representatives of the Council of Europe, have pointed out:

Quality assurance is also problematic because the European Commission issued a position paper in October, immediately after the Noordwijk meeting, which goes far in the direction of giving the Commission a decisive role in quality assurance. It has, however, been reported that many EU countries have expressed strong doubts about this proposal ...

Another problematic issue is that the Commission has also published a calendar for elaborating a European qualifications framework encompassing both higher education and vocational education and training (VET) that could be seen as preempting the discussions within the Bologna Process on qualifications framework for the EHEA.⁴

The analysis of the archives from the initial period of the Bologna Process reveals that the Commission's attempt to subordinate the Bologna initiatives and schemes to its policy priorities are not a recent phenomenon. As it launched pilot projects in the area of quality assurance in the beginning of the 1990, the Commission set in motion policy trends that were later carried on during the Bologna Process.⁵ In the Bologna Follow-Up Group's 2005 report to the Conference of European Ministers in Bergen, the chapter on 'Participating international institutions and organisations' illustrates the articulation between the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy.

The Bologna process coincides with Commission policy in higher education supported through the European programmes and notably

Socrates-Erasmus. From an EU perspective, the Bologna process fits into the broader Lisbon Strategy, launched in March 2000.⁶

The intertwining of vocational and higher education as well as the Lisbon Strategy and the Bologna Process is also evident in the more direct financial support to higher education reforms. In this respect, the Commission plays a structuring role. The Commission provides material and intellectual support to the Bologna Process. It has encouraged the creation of a European Qualification Framework. The Commission's funding of Bologna-related forums, conferences, expert and working groups reflects its political will to push the process forward. Nowadays, the EU-funded programmes are a major source of revenues for the Brussels-based stakeholder organisations representing students, youth, higher education institutions and those promoting EU policy priorities such as 'lifelong learning'. The wide array of funding schemes for higher education highlights the Commission's role as a key player in both vocational and higher education policies. While the Commission's material investments are presented as a neutral means to 'promote' the European Higher Education Area, these funds express strategic political choices.

From an EU perspective, there is also an obvious link between the Bologna Process and the Copenhagen Process on enhanced European co-operation in Vocational education and training, launched in December 2002. The Commission has taken several initiatives to establish synergies between both processes in important fields such as transparency of qualifications (EUROPASS), Credit Transfer, Quality Assurance and the European Qualifications Framework (EQF).⁷

Still, the Commission's role in educational policies, as in other areas that come under the Open Method of Coordination, has been extensively debated. Approaching this from a decentred perspective allow us to go beyond the general debates on the absolute weight of the European Commission in educational matters. The bulk of the academic literature on the topic has been EU-centred. A critical strand of analysis sheds light on the growing involvement of the Commission in the formally intergovernmental BFUG, thus suggesting that the Bologna Process was 'steered' by the Commission (Croché, 2010). Although stimulating, this research focuses on the Commission as the main *spiritus movens* of educational reforms. In a more bottom-up perspective, it is possible to analyse the Commission's growing ties with representatives of academia, Brussels-based stakeholders and EU-funded expert groups that build on the trust forged during their long-term involvement in EU programs.

Governing European higher education through expertise

Experts have become essential links between the EU institutions and the academic community. The political uses of expert knowledge have been the

subject of several publications (Boswell, 2009), including ones focused on Europe (cf. Saurugger, 2002; Gornitzka and Sverdrup, 2008; 2015). In this body of research, expertise is analysed both as a means of administration and legitimisation allowing the Commission to forge alliances in order to better shape its environment (Robert, 2013; 2015). Concerning the transformations of HE in Europe, some authors have looked into the functioning of national expert groups at European level, such as the Bologna Follow Up Group (Lažetić, 2010) or into groups set up as part of the Open Method of Coordination, such as those in charge of ‘peer learning activities’ (Lange and Alexiadou, 2010). Furthermore, the structuration of expertise may be a pertinent avenue for the detailed analysis of the rapprochements and transfers that take place between the OECD and the European Commission (Normand, 2010; Lawn and Grek, 2012). This dynamic approach to expertise – and to its uses by the European Commission (Woll and Jacquot, 2010 – gives us an understanding of European governance as a case of coproduction of policies between the domestic and the European level. The political sociology approach to the EU field has proposed a meticulous critical survey of the population of experts, their skills, careers and trajectories (Robert, 2013, 2015; Michel, 2005).

It is worth asking to what extent HE experts – who have benefitted from the Commission’s recognition – take advantage of their proximity with the European institutions and networks to ask national decision-makers to implement policy instruments and goals elaborated by the European working groups and authorised during the ministerial meetings. I argue that the promotion of external schemes provides some experts with new resources and opportunities and, accordingly, reshapes the power relations within the HE field. However, the relative degrees of empowerment of the Bologna experts and their policy leverage vary depending on the country’s situation within the European Union, their government’s eagerness to implement the European recommendations and experts’ more or less high or low ranking position in the HE governance of their country.

Grasping expertise and rethinking influence

Scholarship on expertise and policy-making has focused on the question of experts’ influence (Klüver, 2013). However, influence is a tricky term that is difficult to define and to measure. The influence of the Commission-funded experts is uncertain, it cannot be decreed; it must be examined carefully on a case-by-case basis. Rather than focusing on influence as the possibility for a group to modify policy outcomes, this contribution argues that influence can be understood in a more relational sense, by analysing the policy positionings of the experts under study and their agenda-setting potentials. The comparison between different domestic cases reveals a considerable variation between countries.

One way to understand the European expert groups is to portray them as epistemic communities, as they appear as knowledge-based groups that contribute to ‘articulating the cause-and-effect relationship of complex problems, helping states identify their interests, framing the issues for collective debates, proposing specific policies and identifying salient points for negotiation’ (Haas, 1992, p. 2). However, when we look more closely at the case of the Bologna Experts, the replication of this scheme seems to be uncertain. According to Haas, not only is an epistemic community ‘a network of professionals with recognised expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area’, but it is bound by a ‘shared belief or faith in the verity and the applicability of particular forms of knowledge or specific truths’ (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Though he admits a degree of diversity in their backgrounds, Haas considers, in a somewhat teleological way, that the individuals he analyses are by definition ‘strong actors at that national and international level’ who manage to consolidate ‘bureaucratic power within national administrations and international secretariats’ and who influence state interests, whether directly or indirectly (Ibid., p. 4). Moreover, the author attributes an all-encompassing role to the power of ideas and beliefs to the detriment of social, political and institutional resources and of changing actor configurations.

The epistemic communities’ framework is not entirely apt in the case of the Bologna Experts, some of whom share common beliefs in the usefulness of specific transnationally promoted educational schemes such as learning outcomes or qualification frameworks, while others may become members of the group due to their status (such as the French student trade unions representatives) and are thus not necessarily experienced nor committed to the Bologna Process as a whole.

The way in which the European Commission develops connections with its stakeholders calls for reconsidering the findings of Agnes Batory and Nicole Lindstrom. According to Batory and Lindstrom, the Commission’s pressure on national HE systems should be re-evaluated in the light of the ‘power of [its] purse’. The authors convincingly demonstrate how the formally ‘soft’ Open Method of Coordination (OMC) mechanisms contribute to a process that is eventually perceived as ‘fundamentally non negotiable’ by its participants (Batory and Lindstrom, 2011, p. 311). They point out the balance of power created by the Commission, in which the grant recipients, i.e. HEI, ‘lobby their governments from below to pass legislation’ (Batory and Lindstrom, 2011, p. 313).

While these findings concerning the bypassing of the national level in order to conform to the Commission’s requirements are important and the study of its mechanisms requires additional investigation, I argue that the idea that ‘the Commission turns universities into agents for its policies’ should be further

refined. This requires analysing the channels through which the impulses from international and especially European forums are transmitted and translated to domestic policy-makers and to a broader academic community. Decentred theory helps to make sense of the differential attitudes to European recommendations by reminding us that ‘the policies a state adopts are not necessary responses to given pressures but a set of perceived solutions to one particular conception of these pressures’ (Bevir, 2013, p. 29).

EU financed experts: brokers between the Commission and domestic policy-makers

By supporting groups representing the academic community’s interests in Brussels, the European Commission replicated an approach that has been observed in other fields. Through its contribution to the emergence and material development of interest groups, the Commission creates a supportive audience and a clientele of its own (Mazey and Richardson, 1993; Robert, 2013). The so-called E4 group organisations based in Brussels – European Students’ Union (ESU, former ESIB), European University Association (EUA), EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) and ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) – have an institutionalised position within the Bologna Process. At the same time, they are the Commission’s partners in the field of HE. As the Commission welcomed their establishment and contributes to a large part of their budget, the proximity between these organisations and the Commission may be more important than between them and their local constituencies. Student representatives, who have been involved in European HE policy-making have in particular experienced upward trajectories. Many of these former student leaders have pursued their professional careers in the European HE field in one of the E4’s groups in Brussels. Some of them work in newly created bodies linked to the E4 such as the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), others as private consultants, domestic policy advisors or HE researchers. Over the last decade, new platforms and student organisations have received substantial EU funding. They are even more dependent on the Commission, as they do not have electoral representativeness and concentrate their action on promoting EU policies, such as the Erasmus Students Network and the Lifelong learning platform.⁸

The reports ordered and supported by the Commission and produced by the E4 and other stakeholders active in the field of education document the way in which the Commission shapes expertise that suits its worldview and political priorities. Working with the E4 representatives has several benefits for the Commission: they appear as recognised partners acting as intermediaries with the academic community. Due to their material and intellectual dependence, the expertise they produce is largely in tune with the Commission’s political priorities and categories of understanding. The Commission has supported

surveys carried out by the EUA (Trends) as well as the ESU and reports on the perception of the Erasmus programme, which have been entrusted to the ESN.

Considering that the Commission is involved in various events and groups that promote the Bologna Process, it appears that the everyday follow-up and dissemination of the Bologna recommendations would be hardly possible without the Commission's support.

The Commission supports National Teams of Bologna Promoters, the production of Bologna information and series of Bologna events, seminars and conferences, including the Glasgow Higher Education Convention of EUA and the Bergen Ministerial Conference.⁹

The HE experts – academics, former academics, students and administrators – have regular occasions to meet and communicate transnationally. It is worth asking what kind of relationship the Commission seeks to establish with national political and academic spheres through their intermediation. While some authors have advanced the hypothesis that they are a means to bypass domestic political processes using European funds and linkages (Batory and Lindstrom, 2011, the 'shortcut' hypothesis needs refining. On the one hand, these scholars are right when they argue that Commission representatives seek to create distinctive relationships and foster domestic policy dynamics to speed up some developments. On the other hand, the way in which these attempts are perceived and accepted – or not – depends on experts' socialisation, on the domestic institutional realm and on political context. As Fischer points out, 'the pursuit of scientific questions is also seen to be influenced by social perceptions, beliefs and motivation of members of the scientific community' (Fischer, 2009, p. 112). All in all, it is important to examine not only the structure and characteristics of each expert group but also broader institutional features: the country's position within/towards the European Union, its position in the analysed policy stream (initiator or latecomer in the Bologna Process) and the domestic political context during the period under study (more or less favourable to European recommendations).

The Bologna experts as educational entrepreneurs and brokers

This section situates Bologna-related expertise in the policy processes in France, Poland and Ukraine. It will investigate how the so-called Bologna Expert groups are set up and positioned between the European Commission and the national governments and how their policy leverage can be defined.

The National Teams of Bologna Promoters, later called Bologna Experts, were set up by the European Commission in 2004 in the European Union and EEA countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway) as well as the EU candidate countries. The teams of Bologna Experts included around 150 to 200 people altogether. The initiative slowed down after 2013 and was discontinued in 2015.

The Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) reflect the geographical duality of the Bologna Process (2005), as they were set up after the inclusion of new countries from Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Caucasus. Following a similar model, the HERE teams operate in the EU neighbouring countries including the Western Balkans, post-Soviet Europe and the Southern Mediterranean area. They are financed by the Erasmus+ programme.

While the European Commission is responsible for the general steering of the HEREs' initiative in accordance with its political priorities, the EACEA is responsible for approving and monitoring the HEREs' activities and ensuring a coherent and coordinated approach for all the 27 countries concerned'.¹⁰

Both groups of experts (Bologna Experts and HERE) were financed by EU funds channelled through the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA). At the domestic level, the National Erasmus+ Offices coordinate the HERE teams and support them administratively, logistically and financially under the supervision of the EU delegations. Due to their brokerage potential between the EU and the domestic political field, the Bologna expert groups are an original vantage point from which to observe the domestic uses of European recommendations and schemes.

Becoming a Bologna Expert

The composition of Bologna expert groups is formally the result of a dialogue between the EU Delegation, the EACEA and the national authorities. The HERE national teams are composed of 5 to 15 members according to the size of the country. The Ukrainian National Team of Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) is meant 'to provide a pool of expertise in certain areas to promote and enhance progress towards the Lisbon and Bologna objectives in the light of national needs and aspirations'.¹¹ This European dimension as well as their previously established links with the Commission have played a noticeable role in the nomination of these experts. First of all, former participation in a Commission-funded European education programme seems to be a common characteristic of the experts nominated in all three analysed countries. Several members of these groups have already participated in European exchange programmes such as Tempus, Erasmus Mundus or in European expert groups and networks before their nomination as Bologna experts/HERE. In Poland and Ukraine, participation in the Tempus (Trans European Mobility Programme for University Studies) programme since the 1990s was a founding experience to the future experts, both in terms of social capital, knowledge accumulation and socialisation.¹² The Tempus programme, which a Polish expert called 'the best invested EU funds' in his country, has played a structuring role in transforming the HE landscape.¹³ The programme helped develop closer ties and expand knowledge transfers between universities from Eastern and Western Europe. It

facilitated the emergence and consolidation of groups of reformers who instigated change within their home universities; it encouraged socialisation and the dissemination of knowledge on HE reforms.

Several characteristics distinguish these experts who have worked in the Bologna promoters' group since the beginning from their counterparts. The experience in promoting the internationalisation of faculties and the administration of their HEI since the 1990s is a main common characteristic. In Poland, they have promoted students' mobility, the two-tier system and English-language courses. Owing to this engagement, some of these individuals established ties with the Commission well before the launch of the Bologna Process. Some of them earned the Commission's label of 'ECTS-DS Counsellors' as a result of their efforts in promoting the ECTS and Diploma Supplement in their HEI.

In the French case, some core members of the Bologna Experts team had a shared experience of participation in the Commission-funded Tuning programme. Launched in 2000, Tuning was meant to support the Bologna Process by defining the curricula in terms of skills, in the name of 'transparency, comparability and compatibility of study programmes'.¹⁴ These multiple linkages illustrate the way in which the Commission manages transnational expert groups. Those individuals who were familiar with the Commission's methodology and professional jargon were able to easily adapt to the new expertise situation and reproduce their working methods in the context of the Bologna Process. However, these Europeanised specialists, trained to harmonise curricula and redefine them transnationally in terms of skills had in some cases limited leverage at the national level, as one of the French participants explains:

This was one of Tuning's weaknesses as we had worked by disciplinary field – we defined the famous skills – but we neglected to make the representatives of different disciplines meet at the national level (...) so we saw each other in Brussels, there were three big working events – but even at lunch we tended to stay with colleagues from the same discipline. This was OK for Tuning but for after Tuning (...) this harmed Tuning's future because when we ended up alone at the national level – well, we were really alone.

(Interview with a former Bologna Expert, 16 February 2016)

The launch of the Bologna Promoters (later: Experts) group thus appeared as a new opportunity to repurpose Europeanised expertise accumulated within the Tuning programme.

Tuning's lucky break was in 2002, when the famous Bologna Promoters were put in place, Waagener from Groningen and the colleague from Deusto, Gonzalez [both leaders of the Tuning

programme] said ‘we have absolutely to make sure that we have some “Tuning” guys nominated among the Bologna experts’.

(Interview with a former Bologna Expert, 16 February 2016)

Beyond these uses of European resources, the case of the Bologna Experts showcases the importance of the political and administrative elites’ perception of their country’s position in the European education space. In the case of an old member state such as France, domestic policymakers sometimes observed the Commission’s activism in the field of educational policies with wariness, which did not necessarily play in favour of the EU-financed experts. On the contrary, in a EU neighbourhood country such as Ukraine, whose domestic political elites sought to tighten political links with the EU and depended heavily on external advice, expert groups endowed with EU funding and legitimacy appear much more central to the policy process. I will consider the extent to which these experts used their position and institutional connections to participate in translating Bologna policy lines and EU schemes in the domestic academic spaces.

The analysis of the Bologna Experts (BE) provides a sociological insight into the relative levels of importance ascribed to Bologna – and Commission related expertise at the domestic level.¹⁵ The comparison between the French, Polish and Ukrainian groups sheds light both on their political resources (relative closeness or distance to the policy process) and on the domestic framing of European policy-making. The comparison between the three groups should not mask the differences either in context or in the political objectives and capabilities of these groups. As EU member states, Poland and France have a closer relationship with the Commission as they have to present their semesterly policy reports required by the Europe 2020 strategy. Ukraine’s relations with the EU are shaped by the association treaty and the neighbourhood policy. Concerning the Bologna Process, France was one of the four initiators of the Sorbonne declaration and, together with Poland, one of the signatory states of the Bologna declaration. Ukraine joined the process later in 2005.

The Bologna Experts’ unequal policy leverage

The members of the Bologna Expert groups may be considered as potential intermediaries between the European level, public authorities and HEI.¹⁶ Their policy impact was difficult to pinpoint. In an evaluation of the scheme in 2012, the Commission had to admit there was ‘little evidence of the impacts of the National teams at the institutional level and no visible impact at system level’.¹⁷ While it is obviously difficult to connect the experts’ activity and their policy impact, and not useful from a social science perspective to reproduce an evaluative and prescriptive approach, a sociological look at the morphology/composition of the group helps taking into account the differences between the domestic cases. A comparative portrait of the Bologna-related

experts shows that the proportion of lecturers and researchers in each group varies: there was a large majority of academic lecturers and researchers in the Polish group (22, versus only 3 administrative staff members and 4 student representatives). In Ukraine, the lecturers and researchers are also in the majority, but they are more difficult to classify, as in many cases they have accepted important institutional and political duties; the proportion of administrative staff and students was similar (22–4–4). On the contrary, in the French database, under half of the members were lecturers and researchers; the rest represented administrative staff and students (13–12–10). In the French group, vocational establishments seem to be overrepresented. These mostly private engineering and business schools have more resources per student, and accordingly can afford to second administrative staff to European working groups; moreover, they pursue ambitious internationalisation policies. Still, general information about status does not tell us much unless we look at hierarchies and responsibilities in greater detail. In Ukraine, the lecturers and researchers seconded to the HERE group tend to have higher positions at the university and at the institutional level than their Polish and French counterparts. This could indicate the relative importance accorded in Ukraine to the Bologna Process at the academic level, and its eagerness to answer the Commission's call to put high-ranking academic representatives in the group.

Another indicator on the leverage of group members and the importance attached to these EU-funded groups domestically is the type of institutional duties assumed by the group's representatives. Only in Ukraine has the HERE team systematically included top ministry executives such as the vice minister of Education in charge of Higher Education.¹⁸ The Ukrainian team generally included the head of the international relations department at the Ministry of Education. Since 2015, the presence of an officer from the Verkhovna Rada (Parliament) enables direct access to the legislative process (especially as several members of the team were involved in the law-making process).¹⁹

Concerning the proximity to the policymaking process, the comparison shows significant differences between the three case studies. Some of the Bologna Experts were asked to participate in ministerial or parliamentary working groups at the domestic level: this policy leverage was noticeable in the Polish and Ukrainian case but almost completely absent in France. In Ukraine, several HEREs were involved in the writing of the new law on HE for the parliamentary committee on Education. Also in Poland, several members of the group known as specialists of European rules and standards were consulted by the ministry (sometimes the minister herself) and participated in expert groups set up at the national level. This affiliation – combined with the financing provided by the Commission – provides the experts with a certain amount of leverage. The situation was quite different in France, where the Bologna experts were not directly associated to the policy process. A majority of the French team

members did not have any political or administrative responsibilities at the ministerial level.²⁰ In some cases, national policymakers were reportedly reluctant to include this group, which they could perceive negatively as an attempt by the Commission to interfere in the domestic policymaking process.²¹

Another factor to the detriment of Bologna experts noted in France and Poland relates to the fact that their policy advice was sought less by public universities and more by private institutions. This caused some ethical problems, raised by some experts.

At first, we were supposed to disseminate the Bologna Process tools. But, I will always remember, the only – the only institutions (...) that contacted us were private business schools! Who wanted absolutely to get the label! I remember that famous ECTS label (...) at first, we got demands only from private institutes to this extent that this raised ethical issues for us. We were funded by the European Commission. I mean, we did not turn down work for private firms but still, our mission was essentially to work with the public sector. I remember, the last ECTS label we gave to an osteology school from Lyon, who had called us.

(Interview with a former Bologna Expert, 16 February 2016)

In Poland, some of the team members are aware of the side effects of Bologna-related reforms such as the multiplication of private counselling firms, who sell their services to HEI.

Well, it's a self-sustaining system that provides jobs to many people, cash to many people. When you look at the money that is spent on training ... You know, there have been many private firms created in Poland for training. I know because they write to me, there are projects, EU funds for this and that and you know, when you write a project it is well regarded if you offer training. (...) We have asked in the Ministry as it is a moral dilemma for us, (...) whether we as Bologna experts can participate in that and the answer of the minister [secretary of state for HE] was yes, there is no collusion of any kind.

(Interview with a Polish Bologna Expert, 2013)

The material aspect should not be underestimated. The financial compensation paid to experts for their daily involvement in explaining the Bologna Process (around 100 euros) is symbolic in France and modest (though not insignificant) in Poland when compared with other, private opportunities. However, in Ukraine, where university teachers may earn officially about 150 euros per month, this is an extremely sizeable addition to their pay.

Conclusion

This study has taken a decentred approach to the study of the Bologna Experts, the Commission's investment in HE policies and on differential domestic framings of external recommendations. Conceived as facilitators asked to help in getting the European message across to the academic audience, the Bologna Experts had unequal degrees of leverage, depending on their position within the policy process: a limited impact in France versus a proximity to the liberal government after 2007 in Poland, combined with a strong policy involvement in the Bologna-inspired HE reforms that were launched during that period. The Ukrainian case reveals close links and even, to some extent, an overlap between the members of the HERE team and the highest positions in the ministry, albeit in a challenging geopolitical and economic context.

Bologna Experts were by no means selected randomly. Many of them had already participated in European Commission programmes such as Tuning, Tempus and Erasmus Mundus. Therefore, they were considered as a reliable clientele by the Commission. In the Polish and Ukrainian cases, their proximity with European working groups and seminars tended to be a resource that could be reinvested domestically. But in the French case, the country of the Sorbonne declaration and one of the Bologna Process initiators, the same proximity could be perceived with suspicion in the Ministry.

Although their expert status usually pre-dates the Bologna Process, the affiliation of Bologna Experts with European networks provides them with various types of resources: institutional, symbolic and financial. In Poland and Ukraine, the EU's support to their expert activities influenced their institutional allegiances. The term of 'co-construction' of HE policies, involving national representatives and EU institutions (Lange and Alexiadou, 2010) applies well to these entrepreneurs in these countries. Their ability to combine several affiliations allows them to be heard in academia, although they do not necessarily hold formal power positions and have often disengaged from research activities. But other expert trajectories also evidence a disconnect between the Brussels-based stakeholders working closely with the Commission and the domestic academic fields.

Notes

- 1 The author would like to thank the organisers and participants of the Decentering European Governance workshop, held in Berkeley on 21 April 2017, for their useful suggestions and comments on a first version of this paper.
- 2 The interviews (2010–2016) were conducted either in English, French, German, Polish or Russian and lasted between one and two hours.

- 3 European Commission, press release, 'The Juncker Commission: A Strong and Experienced Team Stands for Change', Brussels, 10 September 2014, http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-14-984_en.htm
- 4 Council of Europe (CoE) archives, Bologna Process, Follow-Up Group Board, 2004 (file No. 11), Strasbourg, 21 December 2004, Note for the attention of Ms Gabriella Battaini-Dragoni, from the Head of Department of Higher Education and History Teaching, Mission report, Bologna Board, Oslo, 9 December 2004.
- 5 Dorte Kristoffersen, ENQA 10 Years: the History and Development of ENQA, in ENQA; 10 Years (2000–2010). A Decade of European Co-operation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Helsinki, 2010 (Ed. by Fiona Crozier, Nathalie Costes, Paula Ranne and Maria Stalter).
- 6 Council of Europe (CoE) archives, From Berlin to Bergen, General Report of the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education Bergen, 19–20 May 2005, Oslo, 3 May 2005, p. 44.
- 7 CoE archives, Bologna Process (no. 15), Bergen Summit, May 2005, Memorandum, Strasbourg May 24 2005, Note for the attention of G. Battaini Dragoni, Mission report, Ministerial conference of the Bologna Process and BFUG, Bergen Mays 18–20 2005.
- 8 On the funding of student organisations, see Klemenčič and Galán Palomares (2017).
- 9 CoE archives, From Berlin to Bergen, General report of the Bologna Follow-Up Group to the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education Bergen, 19–20 May 2005 (conference date), Oslo, 3 May 2005 (report published).
- 10 European Commission, DG Education and Culture, Higher Education Reform Experts, https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/erasmus-plus/actions/key-action-3-support-for-policy-reform/higher-education-reform-experts-heres_en
- 11 National Team of Higher Education Reform Experts (HERE) www.tempus.org.ua/en/national-team-here/sklad-i-zavdanna.html (accessed on 22 August 2016).
- 12 Adopted by the Council on 7 May 1990, Tempus was extended, in 1993, to the former Soviet republics financed by the TACIS programme. It was closed in 2000 for the countries associated with the EU but extended to other ex-Yugoslavia and neighbourhood countries.
- 13 Interview with a Polish Bologna Expert, 4 August 2011.
- 14 González, Julia and Wagenaar, Robert (Eds.), *La contribution des universités au processus de Bologne*, Bilbao, Tuning/Publications de l'Université Deusto, 2007, p. 9.
- 15 The members of the group are nominated formally every two-three years. Originally referred to as 'Bologna Promoters', the group was called 'Bologna Experts' two years later within the EU. The groups encompassed between 9 (Ukraine) and 23 members (Poland). In all countries, the group includes not only academic teachers but also some representatives of students and administrative staff.

- 16 The analysis presented here is not yet exhaustive. Some members could have different functions depending on the time period (for example, one employee of the Ukrainian ministry in 2009–2010 became a representative of the Ukrainian employers in 2011–2014). Student members were usually nominated for one term while the most experienced members of the group held their position during several terms. My database includes 30 Ukrainian members, 29 Polish members and 35 French members.
- 17 Evaluation of the national teams of Bologna Experts – presentation of the final report, by Frank Petrikowski, Directorate General for Education and Culture, European Commission, and Axelle Devaux, Senior Consultant (ICF GHK), 7 November 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=uR5XeTxvNDA, accessed on 20 September 2018.
- 18 This was the case of the Yuriy Rashkevych, a Lviv Polytechnic professor, who was appointed Deputy Minister for Education and Science in May 2017, and who replaced at this highest position another Bologna expert, the political scientist Inna Sovsun (2014–2016), and previously the historian Taras Finikov and the philosopher Evgen Sulima (both HEREs). Moreover, the Ukrainian team has included some close aides to the minister such as the secretary of state Mihailo Stepko, who was mandated by the minister of Education Kremer, in 2004, to negotiate Ukraine's accession to the Bologna Process.
- 19 Interviews with three Ukrainian education experts, Kyiv, 27 October 2015.
- 20 One of them was advisor for the Humanities in 2006–2007 in the cabinet of the minister delegated for HE and Research François Goulard (2005–2007). One of them has carried several functions at the ministry since 2014, was in charge of the Bologna Follow Up Group and has worked in the French evaluation agency (AERES). But other members with an administrative background represented either public training, cooperation and expertise agencies (Agence Universitaire de la Francophonie, Centre International d'études pédagogiques) or heads of international cooperation at their HEI.
- 21 Interview with a Bologna Expert, February 2016; interview with a former French Bologna expert, January 2015.

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