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Higher Education

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Approaching Policy Learning and Borrowing in Higher Education¹

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Introduction

This brief intervention on policy learning and borrowing in higher education argues that not only are these concepts highly contested, but the recent explosion of policies moving from one location to another has raised policy paradigm and political questions around policies in motion, on the one hand, and knowledge/location claims, on the other.

Policies, of course, are always in motion as they travel from the site of production to the site of implementation. What is different in the current conjuncture is the extent to which a growing number of policies not only move across national territorial boundaries, but also emanate from global and regional bodies, such as the European Commission (EC), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and professional associations, such as the European University Association (EUA) and global unions (EI) (Robertson, 2013).

But there is also a second dynamic at work in the learning and borrowing literature, and this concerns the radical questioning of the source or location of knowledge. This stands in contrast with more than a century earlier, when educators such as Marc-Antoine Jullien – father of comparative education – set out into the world in search of a science of education (Phillips and Ochs, 2003; Auld, and Morris, 2014). Much like the explorers of the new world, whose artifacts and specimens from ‘exotic lands’ were displayed in the museums of the empire, typically inviting us to see the trajectory from traditional to modern societies, the early collectors of ‘education lessons’ were also profoundly influenced by the rise of science, reason and progress, broadly understood as western modernity.

But worlds can, and do, change, including the dominance of paradigms, their ontologies and epistemologies, and in this specific case, what this means for the moving of higher education policies from one place to another. In this intervention, my purpose will not be to take sides, or advance a particular approach at the expense of another, but to sketch out the spectrum of views, so as to see more clearly this terrain, and the claims made for, and limitations of, these approaches. I conclude by reflecting on the tensions inherent in the

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current stand-off between knowledge/location claims, and whether and under what circumstances and conditions, policy learning and borrowing in higher education might have a future.

Overflowings

There has been nothing short of an explosion of papers on the movement of policies from one place to another, accompanied by what might seem to be an overflowing of terms to describe the desirability, efficiency, effectiveness, efficacy and ethics of travelling policy. Policy learning, borrowing, transfer, mobility, translation, diffusion, convergence, lesson-drawing, assemblage, travelling ideas, band-wagging, emulation, harmonisation, the list goes on. This proliferation of terms describing policy movement processes has led one observer to remark that the literature is in danger of being over-theorised (Stone, 1999:2).

Whether this is the case or not can be left for another day. For the moment – broadly – we can see that whilst contributors have very different views on the *who, what, how, why* and so *what* of the matter of policies moving, a commonly quoted definition across these different literature is one by Dolowitz and Marsh who argue that what is broadly being described is “...the process by which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political system (past or present), is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political system” (2000: 5).

Higher Education (and Policies) in Motion

Most writers agree that this current ‘epidemic of education policies’ (Levin, 1998) being moved from one location to another emanates from processes broadly associated with globalisation, especially pressures to build competitive economies, locally, nationally, and regionally. Higher education is deeply implicated in these processes as institutional and sectoral reforms, reconfigured relations between the university and the wider society, new accountability structures, outward facing institutions recruiting international students and staff, are all oriented toward realising this new competitiveness objective.

Across Europe a key governance innovation, the Bologna Process, was launched in 1999 aimed at recalibrating the institutional architectures of many higher education institutions across Europe. This process, and some of its allied technologies like Tuning, have been taken up (in some cases willingly, in other cases not) in different parts of the world, including Asia (cf. Dang, 2013), Africa (Eta, 2015; Charlier et al., 2016), parts of Latin America (Perrotta, 2016), and the United States (Adelman, 2008). Similarly, a burgeoning literature in the higher education sector on a range of matters, from widening participation, to the development of quality assurance mechanisms, policies to promote investment in talent and innovation, and the development of world class universities, all reflect the thickening scale and scope arising from the intensive and extensive movement of policies across spaces.

Researchers have also paused to reflect upon the genesis of these higher education policies, focusing on a convergence of ideas, the diversity of agents and agencies involved, challenges of translation and recontextualisation, and the implications for local practice. In many cases the brokers and knowledge mediators are not just consultants or experts, or indeed government/organisational officials (take, for example, the peer-learning activities promoted by the European Commission – see Jones, 2009), but also unions, student and other movements (cf. Occupy), non-governmental organisations, commercial firms, and more recently social media as well as new learning platforms like MOOCs.

In the following section I will introduce a spectrum of approaches to learning and borrowing of policies, using the creation of a European Higher Education Area and some of its key instruments - including the Bologna Process, as entry points to gain some sense of the possibilities and limitations of the explanatory potential. My purpose in doing so is to highlight the epistemic gains to be had from different approaches, and what this means for the study of global higher education.

A Spectrum of Approaches

For some writers, pluralising solutions and learning from best practice leads to better quality policies, and much of this literature engages with this problematic seeking out lessons to be learnt, and asking why some fail (Phillips and Ochs, 2003; Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000). Much of this literature draws from a particular approach to policy analysis, as largely positivist/systems thinking characterised by linearity, rationality and incrementalism (see Prunty, 1985). By way of contrast with this more linear approach, a post-positivist approach to tracing policy mobility through space is argued to matter (Peck, 2011; Peck and Theodore, 2010; Prince, 2010). Here policies in motion are not only continuously mutating, but also being transformed as a result of contradictory dynamics in unevenly developing policy regimes. For others, 'context matters' (cf. Crossley, 2009) are asserted to be central, so that the particularities of place and culture are to be guarded by the dispensation of moral indignation at the intrusive nature of travelling policies. A final group of writers, including a mix of post-colonial/post-western writers (cf. Takayama et al., 2017; Connell, 2007) view the universalising of a particular (policy) from a distant location (other nation state) as now following the long arc of western imperialism and tendencies toward domination and epistemic violence, and as a result should be named, made visible, and resisted.

In a nutshell, and at its most abstract, what is at issue here is the complex, though differently parsed, set of relationships between knowledge, power and location (both geographically and conceptually), with very differing views on the social and cognitive justice implications arising from these different stances. These four broadly different clusters of stances can be placed along a spectrum of approaches to understanding policy learning and transfer: (i) positivist/pluralist/linearity (ii) post-positivist mobility, circularity, mutability; (iii) interpretivism/particularity; and (iv) post-colonial/post-western. In framing these four, I am indebted to the seminal work of Vasiliki (2016), though in her case she is concerned with how best to address the question of western-centric knowledges more generally, rather than in my case, what are in effect the consequences of western-centric higher education policies that have been globalised and regionalised.

(i) *Lines, rationality, lessons*

The dominant approach in the field of policy studies to policy learning and borrowing can best be described as broadly positivist in ontology and epistemology, embraces pluralist conceptions of power, views the policy process as taking a linear form – from production to implementation, and whose utility lies in lessons that can be drawn so as to produce good practice. Two seminal studies here will be used to exemplify this approach: the works of Dolowitz and Marsh (1996, 2000), widely referred to a range of policy issue areas, including education, and that of Phillips and Ochs (cf. 2003) who write specifically on education in comparative context. Both sets of writers have sought to develop models and frameworks, focusing on policy transfer. Power in these two models is largely understood as taking the form of decisions of the actors who make considered choices about which policy to borrow and which not to.

Dolowitz and Marsh's (2003) approach is to ask a series of questions about policy and its movement, moving from 'why transfer a policy' (what lessons are being drawn from this policy to be moved elsewhere), to 'how to transfer' (e.g. consensus, conditionalities imposed, coercive), 'who is involved' (elected officials, consultants, think tanks, bureaucrats), 'what is transferred' (policy goals, contents, instruments, programmes), 'from where', 'the degree of transfer' (copying, emulation), 'the constraints on transfer' (structural and institutional limitations), and 'the reasons for policy transfer failure' (uninformed, incomplete, inappropriate)? This is a useful approach in that in asking a series of questions across the policy process, it also moves well beyond the unsystematic 'specimen' collecting model. It makes possible comparison, but limits its questioning of knowledge to more instrumental concerns.

In contrast, Phillips and Ochs (2003) offer a staged theory of the process of 'cross national attraction', Four stages are identified: Stage I Cross national attraction; Stage II Decision; Stage III Implementation, and Stage IV internalisation/Indigenisation. The linearity of the policy movement is evident, and indeed this has all of the features of classical implementation models of policy, except in this case a national territorial boundary is crossed causing them to essentialise the national as homogeneous context. Phillips and Ochs (2003: 457) are at pains to point out that 'context matters' across all stages 'context matters' – whether thinking about why policies in one place might be attractive to another, or why conditions in one place open up the search for solutions in another.

Applying these two approaches to the borrowing of the idea of a European Higher Education Area, or the take-up of the Bologna Process, and it is possible to see what insights are generated. but also the limitations. Both approaches are useful in identifying policy as a process, with multiple actors involved. The take-up of the idea of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in Africa via the development of the African Higher Education Research Area and Space (AHERAS) (Mohamedbhai, 2013) is an interesting one, with many of the elements of the EHEA visibly present, including its spatial lexicon, as well as instruments such as credit transfer, quality assurance, and focus on post-graduate studies. It debt to the lender is also noted, with a final section in the document called 'lessons from Europe'.

However, a more detailed analysis of the relationship between Africa and Europe, the largely symbolic nature of the AHERAS, the complicated relationship between the European Commission and its role as secretary in key regional policy forums, the financial dependence of this regional initiative on the European Union, the often circular nature of the movement of the policy processes between Europe and Africa, and the long-standing colonial nature of the lesson learning, shows up the limits of this largely linear, rational, fidelity, problem-solving approach, where perfect rationality tends to be related to voluntary decision-making around policies to be transferred.

Yet as James and Lodge (2003) point out, it is not unusual to find that whilst voluntarily consenting to the policy being transferred, this may well be in a context of bounded rationality in that what is possible is shaped by particular kinds of organisational constraints. It is highly likely that because the AHERAS does not have the kind of executive/financial support via the European Commission, and nor a range of countries contributing to the AHERAS with higher education systems at a similar level of development, the take-up of the EHEA with any degree of fidelity in the AHERAS, will be heavily circumscribed. If there are any lessons to be learnt from this particular approach it is that it underplays the wider contexts that shape policy possibilities, trajectories and outcomes, including the ongoing reshaping of policies as a result of movements, mediations, under-currents, and contradictions.

(ii) Circularity, mobility, mutability

In reaction to the dominance of the linear, rational approach, a new body of work – mostly promoted by geographers – has sought to develop a critical approach to policy transfer, renaming their work ‘policy mobility’ (Peck and Theodore (2001, 2010; Dale and Robertson, 2013). This body of work steps aside from the ‘best practice/lesson learning’ focus of policy transfer, and focuses particularly on the dynamics of power, the transformation of policy as a result of adaptive connections and shifting ideological realignments, the establishment of connections between policy actors and policy sites, the enrolment and mobilisation of advocates and followers across sites, and the consolidation of norms and paradigms (cf. Peck and Theodore, 2010: 169-70). They highlight the embodied nature of expert communities whose own complex and shifting locations open up, or close down, possibilities for doing policy brokering work. They argue that policies rarely travel as a package; they move in bits and pieces; “...as selected discourses, inchoate ideas, ad synthesized models—and they therefore ‘arrive’ not as replicas but policies already-in-transformation” (Peck and Theodore, 2010: 170). The resulting dynamic is one that is not linear but a complex process of nonlinear reproduction. The spatiality of policy work across boundaries can thus be understood as a three-dimensional mosaic of increasingly reflexive forms of governance, shaped by multi-directional forms of cross scalar and inter-local policy mobility. Policies thus evolve through mobility giving rise to new forms of uneven development across spaces.

So how might this help us see the emergence of the EHEA and the Bologna Process, as policies that move in multiple directions? By not focusing on transfer as a one-way, or uni-directional, transaction, it is possible to see the emergence, form and outcomes of the EHEA, and the ongoing transformation of the Bologna Process, as the outcomes of highly fluid, contingent processes that involve movements backwards and forwards across boundaries – from national settings and allied institutions to regions and inter-regional formations (Dale and

Robertson, 2014; Robertson, de Azevedo and Dale, 2016). Over time, different actors are enrolled or disengaged with. For the Bologna Process, it was only after some time that the European Commission was able to play a leading, more determining, role in the rolling out of the process. Furthermore, Melo (2016) shows that the Council of Europe, itself a key player in shaping the reach of the Bologna Process to many countries beyond than the EHEA has played a lesser and lesser role as it was eclipsed by the Commission in a struggle over power. But not all of the movements of Bologna into global space are similar; older African legacies have resulted in new forms of co-optation (Charlier et al., 2016) whilst the take-up of the Bologna instruments in the ASEAN Higher Education Space (Dang, 2016) have been shaped by the older history of that region (newly formed states and strong commitments to sovereignty, as well as by recent politics shaped by the rise of China.

(iii) Contexts and particularities for policy transfer

If the first two approaches address the issue of policy movement, this second pair focuses attention on the knowledge/location question, bringing it to the fore. A weak version of the knowledge/location concern with policy mobility can be found in the work of education comparativists, like Crossley (2009), and the argument that context matters. The concern here, however, is not with power and domination, but with the ethical issues of moving policies from one place to another. Rather than attempt to understand policy as a process, the approach seems to be in taking a moral high ground, and then forming a judgement that the policy was likely doomed to fail *because* it is foreign. Applied to the EHEA and Bologna Process, tools like Tuning might be viewed as potential failures in countries like the USA and Japan, or in regions like Latin America, precisely because they are borrowed from elsewhere and are by definition foreign or 'other'. A great deal more work would need to be done to determine why and how policies do not get traction in a location. For example, taking the example of Tuning in five states of the United States, to what extent is it seen as an agenda tied to interests closely associated with the Federal State Department aimed at limited the power of the autonomous universities in their respective states (Adelman, 2008).

(iv) Post-colonial/post-western policy-knowledges

In this final section, the knowledge/location question related to policy movement is placed squarely on the table by both post-colonial and post-western scholars (de Sousa Santos, 2014; Connell, 2007; Vasiliki, 2016; Connell et al., 2017; Takayama et al., 2017). Post-colonial critiques of policy being moved from one part of the world to another point to the location/located nature of knowledge, arguing that there is a long history in the development of education around the globe (including higher education), of the movement of policies that carry western modernity as its episteme. They question the benign and progressive character of modernity, and stress the pitfalls of Eurocentric thinking and politics by highlighting the link between knowledge/science and hegemony/power. In this view, policy is a mechanism/medium of domination as well as carrying an ideational message. This kind of argument can be made with regard to the Bologna Process – not-in-as-much as it is brokering sets of disciplines that are anchored in western rationalities (which it may not), but seemingly innocuous tools like quality assurance and competencies, and rationales like learning as self-investment have a particular ontology and epistemology at its base; that of the progress and modernity.

However Vasiliki (2016) powerfully argues, there are issues with counter-posing ‘The West’ to ‘The Rest’ in that “...the subversion of relations of domination targeted by post-colonialism is ultimately hindered by the endorsement of a post-secular epistemology, whose radical opening to ‘other ways of being in the world’ comes with the closure. Connell et al., (2017) are sufficiently aware of the challenges posed by such binarised west-rest/north-south thinking, and the implications for a logical praxis – *of no policy from the west circulating beyond its location/ambit*. They call for greater thought being given to the co-construction and co-production of policy by diverse and different policy actors and their constituencies. Their focus on the social nature of the production of policy (the how and by whom, under what conditions, across spaces, drawing on the mutual valuing of knowledge traditions) also has considerable promise for policy work in the fullest sense of the idea of policy work as social labour. Such an approach holds out for a radical openness, at the same time as taking seriously knowledge, power and location. This is a major challenge to contemporary policy makers, in that it requires a radical shift from prescriptions and solutions from the west to the rest, or hollow calls for partnership when what is to be implemented has already been decided). Dialogue, mutuality and learning is dependent on new ways of hearing each other, new approaches to translation, new modes of mutual experimentation and learning. The question here is how might the EHEA and Bologna Process benefit from critique, engagement and radical openness to other knowledges and points of view?

Conclusions

This brief intervention has sought to explore the big and complex terrain of policy learning and borrowing in the context of higher education, showing how its diverse takes on the matter are as much the result of different ways of looking at policy processes, and questions of power. If there is any learning to be had, it is that like all matters of knowledge/power – this is never a simple question with a simple answer. To be sure, policymakers by definition tend to go the route of problem solving and expediency, but even they must carry the burden of responsibility for policies as forms of knowledge/power. As critical analysts of higher education, we need to be more explicit about the limits imposed on us by our theories of the world, and the burden of the responsibilities that follow from our epistemic work.

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