The Bologna Process and its Impact on Local Governance: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper empirically investigates the policy process at University College Dublin (UCD) and its constituent School of Business as it responded to and implemented the tenets of the Bologna Process. The paper investigates how, supranational agencies engage with national policy entities and individual institutions. It reviews how regional and supranational processes and discourses and policy making affected UCD's institutional dynamics and policy production. The production of this policy suggests that policy is shaped predominantly by local policy actors and global influences situated outside of the nation-state. These findings suggest that the nation-state's role in some cases may be overstated in current debates. This paper sustains the suggestion of a global policy field (Lingard, Taylor & Rawolle, 2005) and demonstrates a reconstitution of the local education policy field at UCD.

1. Introduction

The rise of the 'European Education Space' signifies that trans-national governance has altered the roles of national system policy actors). Enders (2004) noted the impact of such governance changes for the micro/institutional policy processes has been under-researched. In light of a European/global dimension to the policy cycle, the political structures operating beyond the nation state, namely the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU), are increasingly acknowledged. This concept of a 'global education policy field' was developed from Bourdieu's concept of a global economic field [15]. Rizvi and Lingard suggest shifts in the development and institutional implementation of education policies, as the values promoted by national systems of education are not just established by the policy actors within the nation state but forged through transnational and global entities [17]. In current studies, there are a number of reductionist accounts of global effects on education policy which do not take account of historical context.

2. Methodology

Insight into the Bologna Process at UCD was evidenced by collecting data through textual analysis of policy documents and the interviewing of 23 key policy actors at UCD and other influential national and global policy agencies. The research started with those working at UCD and worked upwards as key policy makers were identified as influential. Interviewing commenced with staff involved at UCD's School of Business and progressed to those working with the European Commission, European Universities Association (EUA) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

3. Context of Study

Political structures working beyond nations are also structuring national policies, suggesting the emergence of an education policy community across the political elites of supranational agencies (e.g. OECD) and national education systems [5]. This globalised education policy discourse affects policy production within individual nations. The globalisation of the policy cycle suggests potential convergence across nations but still local and national structures must not be underestimated [9]. Global policy agendas do not operate in isolation, but intersect with national customs, structures, and politics, resulting in vernacular policy outcomes [10]. 'Travelling policies' create common agendas, which coalesce with 'embedded policies' [7], i.e. policies accounting for existing priorities and practices found in national, regional or local spaces. The power of the nation-state may have decreased but it is not powerless. As national boundaries become more porous, there is evidence that the 'flows' of people can still be slowed e.g. '9-11', suggesting that the nation-state is of importance politically while being reconstituted [8].

In looking at national embeddedness, some of the Irish policy considerations and influential reports are international in origin, e.g. Skillbeck Report (2001) and the OECD 2004 Report. Using Bourdieu's concept of capital, Lingard et al. suggest that the 'national capital' held by a nation within the global field is the key to autonomy of that nation [15]. Nations have different capacities to mediate the effects of global pressures and policy discourses

produced by supranational agencies through [10]. Introducing modularisation to UCD is acknowledged by the university, as resulting from the recommendations of the OECD, EUA and the Bologna Process; there was little policy input from national level. This might be correlated to Ireland's habitus as a small peripheral country, influenced by the production of policy of adjacent reference societies. Modularisation is an example of a travelling policy intersecting with the embedded policies, governance and practices, despite converging policies e.g. modularisation, there is also divergence within national systems and institutions in how these policies are implemented. Local actors intervene in the introduction of such convergence policies and reconcile them to their practices. This questions how these policies are governed nationally and locally.

Regional initiatives, e.g. Bologna Process, alter the institutional landscape of European higher education, with multilateral groups and transnational associations, making the inter-organisation situation significant from a policy and governance perspective. This is an example of the Europeanisation of education which demonstrates a soft governance, which has learning, education and pedagogy at its core and is not nationally or statutory bound [11]. Non-national agents and governments are involved in the processes of regionalisation based on historical common features. Regionalisation is 'a process where social arrangements become disembedded from their national context and reattached to a group of nations' [13]. It might be a concerted pluralist demonstration of national interests. Or has it obtained the characteristics of a supranational state, with a new governance level covering the entire region, not individual nations? This force of transnational activity shifts the intensity of supranational governance and this too can cause disembeddeding. However, the benefits of increased regional and global opportunities might reduce when universities operate in a particular environment and the decisions are influenced by prevailing norms and conventions. This combination of institutional embeddedness and governance requires further investigation.

4. Discussion

The results of this research recognise national, European and global policy fields. The habitus of UCD, as the largest national university, historically involved in the construction of the nation with high institutional autonomy both determined the development and implementation of policy at the time of modularisation. The analysis of the globalisation phenomenon within local and national contexts demonstrates how the policy process is affected from a bottom-up and top-down perspective

and facilitates study of the 'pays réel' of the Bologna Process [14]. This study evidences that UCD's past and its institutional persona exploited modularisation, as a source of competitive advantage, given the institution's size and unique breadth of disciplines. The disciplinary diversity and institutional tradition influenced the policy to create UCD's 'flavour' of modularisation underpinned by the Senior Management Team's experience. UCD's modularisation concurrently facilitated implementation of a number of 'Bologna' objectives, including semesterisation and ECTS implementation.

Bourdieu's tools illuminate the reconstitution of policy fields outlined above. Lingard et al. argued that the quantity of 'national capital' retained by a nation is a determining factor in the resistance to the global field [15]. This study highlights that the state passively engaged with external agencies, inviting them to conduct reviews which premised national and institutional policy development. These external agencies affected UCD to the extent that there was scope to negotiate an institutional response, predicated upon the habitus of UCD as an institution and individual staff members, to these international organisations, e.g. OECD and the Bologna Process. It implies there was a way for UCD to respect the role of these institutions without accepting their entire ideological agenda. It implies that the agenda is not entirely defined by these institutions, but also by UCD's institutional capital. To date, the concept of institutional capital has not been proposed in the literature. It captures how an institution with a strong historical background and relative autonomy from the state engaged directly with the global and European policy fields, responded in the absence of a strong national policy field. Institutional capital describes the capital retained by UCD contributing to its actions; including its resistance and advances in policy development.

If the argument of the constituted global policy field is sustained (and it appears it is), this research proposes a consequent reconstitution of the local education policy field. UCD's policy capacity and at least one of its schools was reconstituted as the university responded to internal and external policy agendas. In reviewing the different policy spaces or 'policy fields', Bourdieu's conceptual triad provides tools to investigate this complex dynamic. The use of Bourdieu's concepts of field and particularly habitus, convey a sense of determinism, overlooking the role of key individuals. The introduction of modularisation to UCD demonstrates that the agency of individuals, still wield some power in policy production, despite the global educational policy field's influence. This study highlights the reconstitution of the local policy field and rescaled institutional governance, resulting from engagement with the global and regional higher education policy fields. It provides empirical evidence that Irish

higher education is not primarily shaped by the nation state, as suggested by de Wit [16]. UCD had a significant amount of institutional capital and autonomy to determine its policy trajectory, particularly within the Bologna Process. For example, UCD leveraged its key strengths, including its size and disciplinary breadth, to develop its own brand of modularisation called 'UCD Horizons' which was compatible with the Bologna objectives, particularly regarding the ECTS and learning outcomes.

Rizvi and Lingard suggested that the Global South is positioned differently from the Global North regarding the effects of education policy from other international agencies [17]. This article shows that nations have different positions even within the Global North, e.g. Ireland occupies a different space as a smaller, post-colonial nation, than the UK or USA. Schmidt and Radaelli highlighted that discourse reconciles influencing factors including, the social and political norms, the extent of fragmented or decentralised institutional coordination, the political governance structure in different settings [18]. Henry et al. observed that the OECD has more salience in some countries than others [19]. Similarly, the 'European educational policy space' is most pervasive in the least powerful, least developed EU Mediterranean countries. Both agencies heavily influenced this university's agenda differently. The implementation of the Bologna Objectives was perceived as necessary for the institution, whereas the OECD national review set a national agenda which was desirable for UCD.

The 'harmonisation' of module offerings brought about convergence of policy and practice [20]. The process of modularisation inculcated consistency across the university to ensure transfer across programmes but also the potential for module transfer at a national and international level. While it is argued that 'travelling policies' coalesce and interject with existing policies due to the previously fragmented nature of the policy process within the institution, a 'vernacular globalisation' appeared in two phases: first in the university's model of modularisation; and second when modularisation encountered existing programmes. Often the term vernacular globalisation insinuates the national adaption of a global policy in a top down fashion and might be used to label UCD's experience. However, modularisation is the domestication of a global policy by an institution in a bottom-up fashion. This occurred in a national context where the state was not a dominant actor. This current utilisation of the term vernacular globalisation does not capture this dimension as it often refers to the nation state's adaptation of a global fashion, not an institution's. A university appears to be a unique entity in the Irish education field context, as apart from universities, very few institutions have the necessary autonomy

and resources to initiate and implement 'vernacularisation' of policy. On this occasion, the conceptual device 'global vernacularisation' is a more appropriate description to highlight the influence of a global process at the level of the institution and within certain parts of the institution. UCD adopted the policy of modularisation and instituted it into the organisation, in response to an internally generated reform agenda.

Vernacularised education policy suggests a divergence thesis where international policies are mediated by the nation to provide a unique policy and presumes evidence of a strong national field. They argued that nation states develop mechanisms in relation to the process of globalisation by engaging with the developing logic of the education field. Both presuppose the national field as the primary point of response, rather than the institution. This case demonstrates how a weak national state policy field existed during a strong institutional response due to institutional capital. This highlights that institutional policy and national policy have not kept pace with each other. UCD attempted to identify itself outside of the national policy structures, using the recommendations from international / supranational agencies to underpin a competitive institutional strategy.

Global policy fields emerge which instigate a response from the nation state. In this study, the state itself reacted to the competitive global higher education market by seeking a policy agenda from external agencies operating at European and global level. Ireland experienced the lack of a policy capacity for multiple reasons, perhaps including the habitus of Ireland, as a small peripheral country which traditionally was intrinsically influenced by the production of policy by external influences, the protection of university autonomy in the Universities Act 1997 or third level education was seen as of less political importance than other education sectors and was accordingly less well resourced to formulate policy. This coupled with the universities' statutory autonomy and a national disposition to look externally for policy developments, contributed to its delicate national higher education policy field.

5. Conclusion

This research investigated how supranational processes and policy making affected UCD's policy production as it implemented a policy of modularisation. This case demonstrates the embedding of a policy of internationalisation arising from a global discourse and the pursuit of the 'European Education Space', demonstrating trans-national changes in governance of national system policy actors. It evidences how the effects of globalisation manifest in UCD's modular policy responded to internally generated reform and

agencies external to the state. The pursuit and implementation of this policy demonstrates the capacity of non-national political structures, e.g. the EUA, OECD and Bologna Process, to shape not only national policy but also institutional policy [19]. This study highlights the fluid nature of policy making, involving diffuse actors from within and outside of the nation-state and demonstrating the Irish nation-state's increasingly nuanced role. This role may be less influential than anticipated for a number of reasons, particularly the Universities Act 1997.

As this university engaged with dominant global discourses, specifically internationalisation, they had a tangible effect on UCD's policy process. Modularisation, as a policy originating outside of the state, was endorsed by a number of external agencies and was perceived to attend to a number of national and institutional policy agendas, including internationalisation. In response to modularisation and a number of associated reforms, academic governance was rescaled at UCD. A reconstitution of the local policy field was instituted, as UCD engaged with the global policy field. A recalibaration in the power relations within the university also ensued impacting on university governance and it's policy capacity. Thus, the policy of modularisation was not only about pedagogical programmatic developments but changes in academic governance. For example after modularisation was implemented, responsibility for policy production resided with the university's central authorities. Also of note was the appointment of policy officers centrally who formulated and advising on general academic policy topics. After modularisation, there was a common set of university regulations which replaced the pre-modularisation individual, regulations per programme. Researching the local policy process provided empirical evidence of the policy relationship between the university and national, regional and global policy agents. This revealed a complex policy process predicated upon an intricate web of influences from within and outside the state. This transverse sectional approach highlights the university's autonomy from the state, especially regarding teaching and learning policy, and emphasises the absence of explicit state involvement from this publicly funded institution. This autonomy from the educational national state field occurred for a number of likely reasons: primarily the statutory independence of Irish universities and institutional habitus. This study demonstrates that Appadurai's term 'vernacular globalisation' does not sufficiently reflect UCD's experience, as it tends to refer to the state's adaption of a global policy. It assumes a more active state involvement in the policy process. Consequently, the term 'global vernacularisation' captures how an institution adapts a policy originating outside of the nation. This research reconceptualises the effects of globalisation with a 'bottom-up' approach to highlight the effect of the global and European fields on the local policy process. It demonstrates the need for investigations into education policy processes and their ramifications in light of the increasingly pervasive global policy agenda affecting higher education institutions, not only in Europe but worldwide.

6. References

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