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The impact of the Bologna Process on higher education in Latin America

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Abstract

The feasibility of establishing a common higher education area in Latin America, by means of a process similar to the Bologna Process or a variant thereof, is a subject of debate in the region. Despite widespread recognition of the benefits of the Bologna Process in terms of modernisation, innovation and internationalisation, the prevailing notion is that such a process would be unfeasible for Latin America. The arguments at the heart of that idea centre on the risk of homogenising all Latin America’s higher education systems, which would endanger regional diversity and distinctiveness; on the intra-regional asymmetries among those systems; and on inter-regional asymmetries, specifically the lack of a macro-level project for economic, political and social integration in Latin America, and the differences between European and Latin American higher education. This article examines the

validity of those arguments and concludes that, far from having standardised Europe's education systems, the Bologna Process has paved the way for their convergence within a common framework of reference and entailed innovation in and the modernisation of European higher education thanks to a new education model. Those aspects of the European process thus ought to be borne in mind in the current debate on how to reform Latin American higher education systems in order to bridge gaps and overcome the challenges identified in various international reports.

Keywords

common higher education area, higher education reform in Latin America, internationalisation

Impacto del proceso de Bolonia en la educación superior de América Latina

Resumen

La factibilidad de construir un espacio común de educación superior en América Latina, a través de un proceso como el de Bolonia o alguna de sus variantes, es un tema de debate en la región. A pesar de que se reconocen sus bondades en términos de modernización, innovación e internacionalización, sobresale la tesis de que en el caso de América Latina no es factible. Los argumentos en que se sustenta esta tesis son, por una parte, el riesgo de homogenizar los sistemas de educación superior en todas las regiones, lo que pondría en peligro la diversidad y la diferenciación regionales, y, por otra parte, las asimetrías de tipo intrarregional que existen entre los sistemas de la región, así como las de tipo interregional, que se refieren a la falta de un macroproyecto de integración económica, política y social, así como a las diferencias existentes entre las características de la educación superior de América Latina y de Europa. El artículo analiza la validez de estos argumentos y llega a la conclusión de que un proceso como el de Bolonia, lejos de llevar a la estandarización, ha propiciado la convergencia de los sistemas educativos dentro de un marco común de referencia, además de haber traído consigo la innovación y modernización de la educación terciaria europea gracias a un nuevo modelo educativo. Por ello, se resalta que las características del proceso europeo podrían nutrir el debate sobre las iniciativas de modernización requerida por el sector en la región, con el fin de superar las brechas y los retos señalados en diferentes informes internacionales.

Palabras clave

espacio común de educación superior, reforma de la educación superior en América Latina, internacionalización

Introduction

The achievements of the Bologna Process (BP) and the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have led to debate on the desirability and feasibility of copying and extending the process elsewhere. This text offers a general analysis of the main arguments regarding whether or not it would be feasible to reproduce the BP in other regions of the world. In the specific case of Latin America, it has been claimed that such a process would be unfeasible based on two notions: (i) that a regional harmonisation process would result in the standardisation and homogenisation of Latin America's higher education systems (HES), reducing levels of national diversity, distinctiveness and singularity; and (ii) that intra-regional differences (i.e. dissimilarities between the HES within a given region) and inter-regional asymmetries (i.e. differences between Latin American and European HES in terms of development, academic performance, models and educational practices) constitute insurmountable obstacles to any initiative geared to regional academic integration. The article concludes by highlighting the positive influence that particular aspects of the BP could have in relation to the academic reform and modernisation which Latin America requires.

The Bologna Process and its external dimension

Initiatives for forming common tertiary education areas through the harmonisation and convergence of HES represent a trend that has been developing in the higher education (HE) arena since the beginning of the first decade of the 21st century. Such projects have emerged in response to the demands that globalisation and the knowledge society entail, and the BP, with the establishment of the EHEA, is their flagship. As the first of its kind and due to its innovative nature, the BP has become a benchmark, and debate as to how feasible and suitable it would be in regions other than Europe has arisen.

Regional harmonisation initiatives influenced by the BP¹ include those of the East African Community, North Africa and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which are currently at the planning stage, with basic agreements on the integration model to follow being established (Zgaga, 2007; The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education, 2009). The BP has also shaped thinking in the USA (Adelman, 2008) and Canada (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2008).

The same applies to Latin America. Various initiatives have arisen in the region, such as the ALCUE common HE area involving Latin America, the Caribbean and the European Union (EU), the Ibero-American Knowledge Area (*Espacio Iberoamericano del Conocimiento*) promoted by Universia², and two projects being fostered by the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), namely the

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1. The 2005 Bergen Communiqué recognised the influence of the BP, including its education reform model, on other regions of the world. An explicitly promotion-oriented mechanism was designed on that basis. Entitled "A Strategy for the External Dimension of the Bologna Process", its development up to 2007 is documented in Zgaga, 2007.
 2. See Segundo Encuentro de Rectores Universia Guadalajara 2010 (2010).

Common Higher Education Area (*Espacio Común de Educación Superior*, ECOES) and the Network of Latin American and Caribbean Macro-universities (*Red de Macrouiversidades de América Latina y el Caribe*). A more recent example is the Latin American and Caribbean Area for Higher Education (ENLACES), as proposed by the UNESCO International Institute for Higher Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (IESALC) at the Regional Conference on Higher Education (CRES) in 2008. There are also the Tuning Latin America³ (Beneitone *et al.*, 2007) and 6x4 (UEALC 6x4, 2008) projects, which endorse curriculum structures based on the BP's model.

Objections to applying the Bologna Process in other regions of the world

The view that the Bologna Process could become HE's sole regional harmonisation model lies at the origin of various arguments that question the desirability and feasibility of implementing it elsewhere in the world (Sirat *et al.*, 2008).

The first objection consists of the notion that a regional harmonisation process would result in the standardisation of HES within the relevant region, and in homogenisation between the EU's HES and those of other regions. Emphasis is placed on the evident undesirability of such results. Inter-regional homogenisation would endanger cultural diversity and national identity, and would go against UNESCO's policy of promoting diversity and local identity (Sirat, 2008a). Intra-regional standardisation would restrict diversity and distinctiveness among the HES within a region, limiting the equity and relevance of HE as one of its negative consequences (Sirat, 2008b).

The second objection consists of the claim that the BP would be unfeasible outside Europe due to the existence of: a) significant macro and micro-level inter-regional asymmetries between the EU and other regions; and b) intra-regional differences between HES within each of the other regions in question.

The unfeasibility of the Bologna Process in Latin America

1. Standardisation and homogenisation

The idea that the creation of the EHEA has caused the homogenisation of its component national HES is false, according to research carried out by Witte (2006) and Van Vught (2007), which clearly shows that the BP has not targeted standardisation but rather convergence based on recognition of and respect for national diversity and distinctiveness. Van Vught (2007) stresses that diversity among

3. Tuning Latin America is now in its second stage (2011-2013), the first activity of which consisted of a meeting in Bogotá, Colombia, on 18 May 2011.

HES is one of the factors with the greatest bearing on quality, relevance and equity, a means of specialisation which produces graduates with profiles in line with the demands of society and the job market, and a crucial factor where competitiveness is concerned. Such diversity also makes HE more accessible to students with different social and educational backgrounds, thus contributing to equity and social mobility.

The BP has been implemented with full recognition of diversity since the outset. The Sorbonne and Bologna declarations both emphasise that the BP is a common framework of reference which allows for the compatibility and comparability of different HES with a view to achieving a dynamic of convergence among them (Allegre *et al.*, 1998; European Ministers of Education, 1999). The BP's originality lies in the fact that it is an integration process compatible with the cultural and linguistic diversity among different national HES and with HE institutions' autonomy. The extent to which such convergence is gradually being achieved was shown in an empirical study conducted by Witte (2006). More recent studies confirm that the aforementioned convergence is compatible with the different degrees of diversity among and levels of distinctiveness of the HES involved in the BP (Van Damme, 2009; Witte *et al.*, 2009; Surssock *et al.*, 2010). Thus, diversity and distinctiveness are not, in themselves, an obstacle to regional integration processes. In that light, the homogenisation argument is baseless, leading to the hypothesis that the BP model could be implemented in other regions of the world with high levels of diversity and distinctiveness, as is the case of Latin America.

2. Inter-regional and intra-regional differences

The second set of arguments according to which the BP is unfeasible in Latin America has two variants:

- The first involves macro-level inter-regional asymmetries, i.e. the disparities between the EU and Latin America (Malo, 2005; Brunner, 2009; Carvalho, 2010) in terms of economic and social development, plus the fact that the latter lacks a macro-project for integration; and micro-level inter-regional asymmetries in terms of education models, degree structures and academic and teaching practices, as well as the levels of development, consolidation and academic performance corresponding to European and Latin American HES.
- The second involves the intra-regional differences between HES within Latin America in terms of coverage, size, funding and public and private sector development, among other aspects (Brunner, 2008).

With regard to macro-level inter-regional differences, the existence of a political, economic and social project such as the EU is deemed a *sine qua non* for the creation of a common HE area, giving rise to the conclusion that regional academic integration is unfeasible for Latin America (Brunner, 2008). There is also a tendency to point out that the factors that brought about the BP in the EU are absent in Latin America. Such factors include common political determination to stimulate the knowledge society through innovative education models to cater for contemporary needs, consolidated HES

with a high level of academic performance, and a common job market and the free movement of professionals (Carvalho, 2010).

Arguments concerning micro-level inter-regional differences revolve around contrasts between European and Latin American HES in terms of levels of consolidation and performance, as well as of institutional and academic models. Despite Latin America's universities having been created on the basis of a European model (i.e. the Napoleonic model), their historical evolution was different from the outset, and the Córdoba Reform only served to heighten that divergence (Bernasconi, 2007). Lastly, the education models currently prevalent in each region constitute another relevant difference. Latin America has a traditional academic model⁴, while that promoted by the BP is based on learning outcomes and skills (Brunner, 2008).

In addition to the aforementioned macro and micro-level inter-regional differences, there are specifically intra-regional dissimilarities, corresponding to the different types of HES within Latin America in terms of size, coverage, diversity among HE institutions, public and private sector development, the nature of relations with the relevant state and forms of funding (Malo, 2005; Brunner, 2008; Carvalho, 2010). The situation in question is partly attributable to the diversity of the region's countries in relation to demography and levels of economic and social development. Nonetheless, certain common tendencies within Latin America can be identified, such as a great proliferation of tertiary institutions with different characteristics and growth in the private sector (Brunner, 2008). In Latin America, national systems, "...far from being geared to greater institutional homogenisation and isomorphism, are subject to strong centrifugal tendencies of diversification and variation where their organisational principles are concerned, resulting in a low capacity for association and cooperation" (Brunner, 2008). The reasoning described previously leads to the conclusion that the major diversity among Latin America's HES would prevent the implementation of a process similar to the BP. However, it should be noted that, as shown in the first section of this article, the BP has always been designed to accommodate Europe's high level of cultural diversity and institutional distinctiveness. With that in mind, diversity and distinctiveness in Latin America should not, in theory, hinder convergence between its HES. Conclusions to the contrary would therefore need to be corroborated by empirical and conceptual research, as the analyses carried out to date on diversity within HE in Latin America, including those that appear in Gazzola *et al.* (2008) and that undertaken by Fernández Lamarra (2010), are insufficient to sustain the corresponding objection⁵. Nonetheless, we concur with Brunner (2008) that the existence of a sizeable, rapidly growing private sector in the region can be deemed an obstacle to the design and implementation of far-reaching national and supranational policies of the kind required for the establishment of common HE areas. It should not be forgotten that the European HE arena mainly comprises public institutions accustomed to following national policies designed by ministries of education. Furthermore, the implementation of the European Commission's internationalisation programmes has shown that Europe's institutions are capable of following supranational policies that go beyond the jurisdiction of national ministries.

4. This traditional curriculum model has been criticised by the OECD and the World Bank in their recent appraisal of HE in Chile (OECD-World Bank, 2009). In our opinion, the appraisal's findings can be applied to the whole of Latin America.

5. It should be noted that the purpose of the analyses in question was not to discuss the BP's unfeasibility.

The Bologna Process as an influence for higher education reform in Latin America

Generally speaking, in summary, claims that a process similar to the BP would be unfeasible in Latin America are based on the absence in the region of the conditions that led to the BP's implementation in Europe. However, the possibility that promoting convergence involving various aspects between Latin America's HES, as well as with other regions, could act as a springboard for modernising the sector and reforming academic structures should not be ruled out. The debate therefore ought to focus more on the potential benefits of implementing a common framework of reference which respects regional singularities to meet the specific challenges facing Latin America today. That notion stems from the fact that the BP is not solely geared to convergence, but also encompasses a process of academic reform involving the adoption of a three-cycle architecture, the introduction of an academic model revolving around learning outcomes achieved through education geared to the development of general and specific skills, based on a modular curriculum structure, and the implementation of a system of accumulable, transferable credits (Witte *et al.*, 2009). In other words, the BP has a dual composition, in which convergence does not occur without education reform and vice versa.

The requirement for HE reform in Latin America, incorporating some of the curricular aspects (duly contextualised) of the aforementioned education model, has been expressed on many occasions, including by Malo (2005), Mora (2004) and Gacel-Ávila (2010). A reform of that kind in the region would be driven by the need to overcome the educational divides and shortcomings identified in various international reports⁶, to train graduates to endow them with the skills required in the 21st century, and to prepare the sector for the international HE assessment models that will be applied in the next few years⁷. In that respect, there is a stark contrast between the EU and Latin America in terms of models of HE institutions, degree structure, the organisation of teaching in curricula and learning approaches, making an in-depth HE reform process in the latter region even more necessary. We are of the opinion that all initiatives pursuing such a goal should draw on and reap the benefits of existing international experiences such as the BP. The aforementioned factors gave rise to the Tuning Latin America and 6x4 projects, which have produced two proposals for reforming Latin America's traditional model on the basis of the BP's curriculum structures. The aim of the ENLACES project is the same⁸, in that it seeks to establish a network of networks for the purpose of overcoming the shortcomings and divides affecting HE in Latin America (Carvalho, 2010). This represents a different starting point from that of the BP. The goals of the ENLACES project's strategic programmes include curriculum convergence and HE reform. In the former case, it aims to support sector initiatives for the harmonisation of study programmes, such as the proposal made by the IESALC, the Inter-American

6. This refers to reports on Chile (OECD-World Bank, 2009), Mexico (OECD, 1997; OECD, 2008) and Brazil (OECD, 2010).

7. This refers to projects such as AHELO (Nusche, 2008) and to the development of multidimensional global rankings, such as U-Multirank, which are currently at an initial stage.

8. In this regard, it should be noted that aspects related to cooperation between institutions are still prioritised over those involving convergence and academic reform in the ALCUE and Ibero-American Knowledge Area projects.

Organisation for Higher Education (IOHE) and the Union of Universities of Latin America and the Caribbean (UDUAL) to create a programme that draws on part of the experience of the Tuning Latin America⁹ and 6x4 projects. In the latter case, ENLACES advocates "...debating and promoting reviews of higher education systems' institutional structures in LAC [Latin America and the Caribbean] ... looking to remove obstacles and guarantee political and legal conditions for the implementation of the principles and recommendations established by the CRES" (Carvalho, 2010). It thus aspires to benefit from the BP's education model through the results of the Tuning Latin America and 6x4 projects. Additionally, there are other noteworthy initiatives for the creation of common areas encompassing consortiums and associations of HE institutions, as is the case of the regional and national common HE area that the UNAM is promoting in Mexico through the ECOES and Network of Latin American and Caribbean Macro-universities projects, as mentioned previously.

We believe that an academic reform inspired by international models such as the BP, with an internationalised curriculum, greater mobility for students and academics, and joint degrees and qualifications offered in conjunction with foreign HE institutions, would be one of the best ways to change the current educational paradigms and endow graduates with the skills required today. The ultimate aim of doing so would be for Latin America to attain higher levels of economic development, international competitiveness and citizen well-being.

In relation to such ideas, it would appear that, in contrast to other regions, Latin America, with some notable exceptions, lacks political and economic elites with the political will to make education a springboard for development, given that state policies with a long-term view of the direction in which the corresponding education sectors ought to be moving are notable by their absence. Such a long-term view is essential for regional academic integration, which also requires the different figures involved in the political arena and the education sector to establish a project for the modernisation of the latter, with a view to overcoming the weaknesses and shortcomings referred to previously, such as a lack of development of general skills, an inflexible curriculum with a long, professionally-oriented first cycle, and difficulties where the recognition of degrees is concerned. The dearth of such policies is one of the obstacles that have prevented the implementation of a convergence process in Latin America progressing beyond debate and resulted in the failure of those involved to come up with a specific plan of action.

Conclusions

In this article, we have attempted to summarise the main arguments and limitations behind claims that a convergence and academic reform process such as the BP would be unfeasible in Latin America, and

9. This refers to the Tuning Latin America project's first stage, which ran from 2003 to 2007. The project's second stage is geared to completing every aspect of the process and examining new methodologies related to students' workload and profiles, among other matters. At the time of writing, the Tuning project is at different stages in a number of countries not covered by the BP, specifically the USA, Australia, Canada and various African nations. Additionally, the initiative's methodological approach has been incorporated into the AHELO project.

have sought to broaden the debate by exploring new ideas. We have pointed out that, far from being a sole, rigid model that promotes standardisation and restricts diversity and distinctiveness, the BP is a highly flexible process that allows for the coexistence of many variants within a common framework of reference and encourages convergence between HES characterised by major cultural diversity and educational differences, as is the case of those of Europe. On that basis, we have questioned the validity of the argument that such a process would be unfeasible in Latin America due to the levels of diversity and distinctiveness among its HES. In that respect, we have concluded that more comprehensive research on institution types and the distinctiveness and diversity of the region's HES must be carried out, as it was in Europe, before such a process can be written off as unfeasible.

Additionally, we have emphasised that the BP entails academic reform based on highly innovative academic structures. Analysis and discussion of the process could thus enrich the debate on modernising education in Latin America. We have indicated that the Tuning Latin America and 6x4 projects show how curriculum structures with comparable, compatible results can be achieved despite intra-regional and inter-regional differences. A project geared to convergence and to the establishment of a common HE area in Latin America, drawing on the European experience, as well as to greater internationalisation where curriculum structures and content are concerned, could be a way to enhance the region's academic performance levels and achieve more successful integration into contemporary society. The debate on the BP must therefore be widened, serve as the basis for thorough research in Latin America and attract greater attention from the region's governments.

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