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The Effects of the Bologna Process in Vocational Education and Training: A Theorized Literature-Based Argument

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Abstract

Bologna Process (BP), founded to meet growing challenge of international education and fulfill employment market demands in Europe (Caddick, 2008), has transformed European higher education system (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2012) with remarkable results (Vassiliou, 2012). The Bologna Process has also led to some controversy (Cardoso et al., 2008). Some of these controversies were expressed as concerns, ranging from lack of financial reforms to adapt technical education (Reichert & Tauch, 2003) to lack of consultancy resources for technical advice (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009), about BP's impact on vocational education and training across Europe. Through theoretical framework and literature research methodology, this paper attempts to illuminate theoretically the impact that BP has had on career and technical education in Europe.

Keywords: Bologna Process, Vocational Education and Training (VET)

A quiet revolution is under occurrence within European higher education (Davies, 2008) because there has been a sheer expansion of demand for higher education degrees (OECD, 2012; Oppedissano, 2011; Davies, 2008; Horner & Dobert, 2008), which has also led to some controversy (Cardoso et al., 2008). Bologna Process, one of the largest undertaken endeavors (ESU, 2012) and "the single most important reform (Davies, 2008; p. 935)" of education, has substantially influenced the European education (Bunning & Shilela, 2006) continent-wide and deeply affected the university stakeholders including staff, students and teachers (Elias & Brennan, 2009). And thus far, it has shown remarkable results in its first decade (Vassiliou, 2012). In 1998, four Ministers in

charge of education from France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom issued a joint statement declaring architectural harmonization of European higher education system (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). The launch of the Bologna Declaration (1999) has since caused major changes to degree structures (Bunning & Shilela, 2006).

The implementation of a common higher education academic degrees structure across Europe means that some European countries are moving away from a four- or five-year first cycle degree cycle to a shorter three-year cycle as suggested by the Bologna Process (Cardoso et al., 2008). The move towards a common European higher education has revealed the problems that it encountered in individual European countries. Although there has been a strong commitment by many signatory countries, majority of them have expressed significant lack of financial support for the Bologna reforms (Reichert & Tauch, 2003) or even for consultancy for technical advice (Altbach, Reisberg, & Rumbley, 2009). Others have also widely expressed concerns with the impact over the career and technical education.

The weaknesses of career and technical education (CTE) and its equivalence, vocational education and training (VET), have been troubling because they target country's most vulnerable and least privileged (Hoffman, 2009). However, in order to agree with Hoffman (2009), one must understand why technical education was created in the first place. Reasons differ and are as a result of different needs and what they promote. Technical and vocational educational programs are not only means to increase productivity or economic growth or even increase employability among its participants but to also improve equity and social cohesion among marginalized groups (Calleja, 2014) who otherwise would not be able to participate. Thus, to dis vocational and technical education is the equivalence of belittling discourse to education.

To Europeans, vocational and technical education (VET) *can* play a special role in promoting both economic and social competitiveness (Heidegger, 2000; Abs at al., 2009; Aspin & Chapman, 2009) although the focus is to mostly benefit the worker (Wu, 2003). To Americans (U.S.), career and technical education is an attempt to address and meet economic needs that the economy demands (Hogg, 1999; Englert & Grossmann, 2009). To Australians, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) has emerged as a career guidance to contextualize market realities and to empower individuals see lifelong perspectives (Zelloth, 2014). Regardless its reason for inception, technical training is not only crucially important but it also supports and stabilizes the emergent policy framework for European higher education system (Keeling, 2006).

The Bologna Process is one sort of higher education system, that has arguably been founded to meet growing challenge of international education and fulfill employment market demands in Europe (Caddick, 2008), and the question posited is not whether the effect of the Bologna Process has profoundly affected technical education but to what extent has this effect affected technical education. This paper will attempt to shed some light over the Bologna Process impact on the career, vocational and technical education throughout Europe and learn where the future of vocational and technical education is headed.

Literature Research Context

The United States considers career and technical education to be the education of the 21st century (Castalda et al., 2000 cited in Wu, 2003) but its role is often misunderstood and misinterpreted across different countries. At times, terminology used across nations is also different. The United States emphasizes it as *Career and Technical Education* (CTE). Australia has named it *Technical and Vocational Education and Training* (TVET). And most of the world, including Europe, calls it *Vocational Education and Training* (VET). Since technical and vocational training takes place anywhere between upon completion of secondary education to adult continuing education, the definitions of what constitutes technical and vocational education are also different. For this reason, the Occupational Outlook Handbook compiled by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2014) and Terminology of Vocational Training Policy compiled by the European Centre for the Development (Cedefop) of vocational Training (Tissot, 2004) are consulted to establish the definition of terminology and its use throughout this paper.

According to BLS (2014), education is the needed levels of education to enter an occupation and occupation is a craft, trade, profession or other means of earning a living which employees within same occupation perform same tasks whether or not they work and operate within the same industry. Cedefop (Tissot, 2004) defines education as the improvement or update of individual's knowledge and/or skills, acquisitions of new skills for a career move or retraining and continuation of personal or professional development. Either definition implies that technical education is the education that aims to help individuals to enter a profession, to upgrade or obtain the necessary skills by which he or she earns an income. The focus here is to examine technical education from the lenses of occupational profession; that is, occupations that upon training will enable employees to earn a decent living income. To name a few they range from average paying professions such as mechanics, chefs, welders, cosmetologists to high paying professions including lawyers, nurses, engineers, dentists etc. Some of these professions also require at least 3 years of full-time academic work beyond traditional four-year university studies. However, they were examined in a technical context because, according to distinguished award-winning scholar Abbott (1988), they require a fair amount of expertise to carry although the results, at times, cannot be guaranteed. Hence, the focus is on jobs that require specialized technical training.

The Impact

The significance of technical education has been and is still receiving ever-increasing attention by European policy-makers (Calleja, 2014). The increase of attention has come as a result of an agenda agreement between the Member States of European Union, the European social partners and the European Commission to increase participation of individuals in technical education (Council of EU and European Commission, 2010). A greater participation of individuals in technical education will require a stronger synchronization with the Bologna Process in order to produce a synergetic effect with the Bologna Process' instruments and principles (Council of EU and European Commission, 2010).

Nonetheless, a study by Cardoso et al. (2008) has indicated that adoption of the Bologna Process has increased the demand for higher education and Calleja (2014) has

statistically documented the increase of technical education participation over recent years. Majority of the countries who have opted to adapt the Bologna Process, have offered and still offer technical and vocational training. Yet, most of them have decided to make the transition from technical education to higher education (Davies, 2008). Transition from technical and vocational education has widely been argued in relation to higher education institutions' missions. Scholars Hackl (2012) and Neave (2005) have supported this transition on basis of training a workforce for the knowledge economy. Neave (2005) argues that traning centers were converted for public employees and agents including bureacruats, judges, lawyers, teachers, medical doctors and other publicy-related service roles for a knowledge economy. Similarly Hackl (2012) argues that the emphasis on curiosity-driven research has shifted to "economically-relevant research (p. 89)" with the focus to enhance competitiveness of national economics. Hence, universities have become more business-like organizations driven to prepare a knowledgeable workforce in service to community to be later absorbed by the private and public sector. Other scholars believe that higher education is increasingly becoming "embedded in transnational economic spaces (Miklavic, 2009, p. 122)" where internationalization is an integral strategy for economic competitiveness (Britez & Peters, 2010). Moreover, even in a knowledge society, expertise skills including those vocational and technical are equally important to academic skills and competencies (Englert & Grossmann, 2009; Council of EU and European Commission, 2010; Bank, 2014).

Calleja (2014) theorizes that the life of European education and training practices lies on the access of adult participation in lifelong learning programs. Some of the fields that require lifelong learning participation have supported this argument. For instance, engineering and computing fields has concluded that the technical education among young men and women will increase with the implementation of the Bologna Process (OECD, 2012). The nursing field also has reported the impact of the Bologna Process as a positive one seeking to unify professional and higher education with career and technical education. Moreover, early studies in Ireland, UK and Germany have also provided clear evidence of the positive impact on student experiences and outcomes (O'Carroll et al., 2009). Scott (2009) has attributed the impact to two factors. The first factor, in alignment with Powell, et al.(2012), was the increase of demand for technical and expertise and professional skills and two, an increase of social demand for higher education. The former and first impactful factor also appear to suggest an enhancement of team work cooperation (Hendricks & Scheerens, 2009).

Some scholars (Cardoso et al., 2008; Davies, 2008) have agreed that the Bologna Process spurred growth mainly in professional education but technical education has also been positively influenced and perceived. Technical education programs, particularly, have seen growth (Calleja, 2014). A large contributor to the growth of recognition in technical education sector has come largely by private enterprises and government-recognized or accredited institutions for technical and professional education (Crosier & Parveva, 2013). Other parts of this successful impact are also attributed to the abiilty of the Bologna Process to process and accommodate different levels of academic and technical paths for students (Veiga,

Amaral, & Mendes, 2008). In fact, one of the most prominent characteristic of the Bologna Process is the inability to draw a clear boundary between academic and technical education (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2012), thus blurring the line between academic and technical education to accommodate more educational choices for traditional and non-traditional students. The reason why accomodation is important is because a large corpus of research has theorized the higher education success factors but only a few have actually focused attention on educational choices (Oppedissano, 2011) which is exactly what Bologna Process is capable of offering to its participants including work migration as one of the most important factors in ensuring its mobile success among students.

Work migration facilitation is a factor that has played a large role in the impact of the Bologna Process mainly because mobility of young people has grown rapidly either to obtain new educational credentials or high wages and higher quality of education (Bezis & Soueri, 2011). Presumably, the ability to move across Europe freely will enable workers to have access to technology unavailable in their own country and to obtain new skills unknown due to new jobs creation. These jobs range from computational jobs such as application development, user experience design, cloud computing to market research data mining, elderly care and sustainability experts that a decade ago were inexistent (Forbes, 2012).

Facilitation of work migration across the continent has widely contributed to impact and it is expected to rise. The qualification levels expected to increase from diploma level to graduate level under a unified platform (Davies, 2008; Cardoso et al., 2008). Such unification and facilitation is greatly welcomed because of the mobility of students and professional workers that can migrate from a country where there is a surplus of workers within a certain field to a country facing employees' shortage of the same field. Unification is also very critical and closely connected to mobility of technical education because once skilled-labor is enabled to move freely across the continent, employers in different countries around Europe can utilize employment gaps and allow them to grow and expand in size. Additionally, the new employment workforce from different countries is fully equipped with the same obtainable skills as the professionals of that particular country. Naturally, that expands the opportunity for employers to grow who seek qualified candidates for certain positions and more opportunities for employees who seek to match their individual skills with employment positions. Accordingly, Davies (2008) expects more realistic opportunities for mobility and employability for undergraduate and graduate students. Thus, employability is expected to rise and so is expected the acquisition or the upgrading of new skills.

The relational importance between technical education and higher education is growing because changes in the world of work are shifting (Powell et al, 2012). Although impact results have shown positive signs thus far, it still remains to be seen the long terms effects of the Bologna Process in technical education. Even more interestingly to see unravel is how the Bologna Process will balance the employee shortage in technical and professional positions throughout Europe.

Conclusion

In an increasingly competitive world, countries need an exponentially educated

and skilled workforce to remain competitive and succeed (OECD, 2012). Developed countries are giving significant prevalence to higher education (Oppedissano, 2011) and the implementation of the Bologna Process is one kind of arrangement that supports "uniformity and coherence (p. 35)" to arrange different kinds of hierarchical educational institutions. The impact has also extended to technical educational institutions.

One of the succeeding arguments in support of the Bologna Process is the positive impact on career and technical education due to its accommodating abilities for technical and professional and academic positions. The institutions that are in business of providing career and technical education are diverse and range from vocational educational institutions and professional development centers to workplace centers, colleges and universities (Billett, 2011). Hence, the scope and opportunities to obtain new skills are wide and abundant whether those skills are acquiring in postsecondary or adult training. Some countries (Andorra, Cyprus, Finland etc.) have even taken steep measures to ensure flexible studies including e-learning opportunities and weekend classes among other initiatives to promote flexibility to choose from different kinds of educational programs (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2012).

Generally speaking, being able to choose from a menu of choices enhances the attentiveness towards choices and guides the participant towards selection. For instance, in France, structural adaption of the Bologna Process has introduced new professionally-oriented programs and in Poland, it has developed public vocational and technical higher education institutions (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2012). Latest report from EACEA P9 Eurydice (2012) has shown that students' accessibility to more educational program choices has been perceived and seen positively that ultimately contribute to "parity of esteem and equality of different educational choices and pathways (p. 83)." Similarly, the more choices available to students to choose from between technical, professional or academic opportunities in life, the higher *may* be the chances for the participant to continue his or her education regardless of career selection. Of course, at times, many students will choose to change careers and doing so, the Bologna Process prevails at offering choices to switch among career paths. Under the Bologna Process, the switch between career paths is commonly understood as a non-traditional route to higher education (EACEA P9 Eurydice, 2012).

Although the Bologna Process has offered an array of opportunities to its participants, whether that is to attend higher or technical education degrees, it also represents a degree of difficulty in implementation. This difficulty, according to Horner and Dobert (2008) has come as a result of differences between national traditions characterized by particular national features because the European higher education systems are deeply rooted in their respective nationalistic backgrounds. Thus, it is logical to indicate that teaching of education differs across European nations despite their attempts to synchronize. The same rationale also applies to technical education although at a much lesser degree. Technical occupations like carpenters, plumbers, mechanics, doctors, pharmacists and other related technical professions are universally ubiquitous positions differing minimally across borders. Hence, employee shortage or surplus will most likely not occur because many employees will seek to upgrade and match their skills with organizational needs or new tools and technology will redesign and standardize

positing making it easier for employers and employees to match their skills. One concern, however, remains on the affordability of either new technology or upgrading new skills.

Ever though the relative decline of public funding is a concern and shows no signs of reversing to Texeira (2009), the accessibility to move to new careers and the inclusive fundamentals of the Bologna Process will lessen the magnitude of funding decline effects. Hence, more accessibility to either upgrade skills or move freely between careers with enhancement of technical training will open more career and technical opportunities for students who cannot afford a higher education but rather opt for technical or vocational schooling. This particularly is not a problem because the market of labor will regulate itself in balancing the need for technical, professional and academic education. Moreover, higher education institutions will have to adjust their role to prepare professionals with the adequate skills to fill in the gaps of employment.

Technical training offers decent opportunities. It is worthy. It is influential in societal and organizational lives. And it should be respected and encouraged. Even though there is a drive of conversion for nations to switch to a more knowledge economy with the Bologna Process, the impact of the Bologna Process will sustain positively; mainly because the increasing cost of education may inhibit access for some to higher education and will offer an alternative to educational career path: technical or vocational education. Maybe economic forces (*shortage, surplus*) will either provide more incentives for individuals to choose a technical career path or better yet, individuals will understand the value of technical education with the new rapid upcoming changes surrounding our lives. Regardless where the influence comes from, technical and continuing education is worthy to be explored.

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