Striving for Uniformity, Hoping for Innovation and Diversification: a critical review concerning the Bologna Process - providing an overview and reflecting on the criticism

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Striving for uniformity, hoping for innovation and diversification: A critical review concerning the Bologna Process – providing an overview and reflecting on the criticism

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Abstract

The implementation of the Bologna Process (BP) did not go as smoothly as the Bologna Follow-Up evaluations suggest, and the consequences of the BP for the various European higher education systems and universities are much more diverse than represented in these various studies. Relatively few research and policy documents taking up a more critical stance are currently available while a systematic overview of such studies is still lacking. Purpose of this paper is to provide an overview and consequently reveal the most prominent views concerning the BP, as well as emphasize the critical developments over a longer time period. A longitudinal literature review was carried out, consisting of 161 studies between 2004-2013, resulted in a final selection of 91 studies. Our paper demonstrates that the studies available in our search show that issues concerning challenges, tensions and critical viewpoints about BP exist and yet confirms that further research is called for. It is further suggested that the impact of the BP discourse would benefit from the adaptation of a continuously critical reflective approach, as an on-going part in the overall discussion about the BP.

Keywords: Bologna Process, literature review, longitudinal perspective, higher education policy, critical perspective.
Introduction

Insights into the importance and scope of the Bologna Process (BP) in the incorporated 49 member states are increasingly available. The actual impact of Bologna at the level of the individual Higher Education Institutions, as well as its consequences for the faculty and department level are gradually becoming more visible (Neave & Amaral, 2008; Reichert & Tauch, 2005). A vast amount of policy documents, describing the BP, supporting the stipulated BP, and recognizing all the benefits of the BP, has been produced over the last years. But within this growing body of BP literature, still relatively few studies concerning negative and unwanted outcomes, or taking a critical stance on the matter have been carried out (Huisman, 2009; Neave & Amaral, 2008). Studies that discuss what is left out in the implementation of BP or which are the pitfalls to be avoided have scarcely been conducted and have not been debated in any thorough and systematic way until now. Given the ‘fundamental and dramatic change in higher education structures across Europe’ (European Commission, 2010, p. 1) brought about by BP and any new challenges which may be emerging, we will argue that such a critical stance is crucial for the future of European higher education. From the start, the three overarching objectives of the Bologna process have been: introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study (European Commission, 2013).

Internationalisation of and in higher education (Wihlborg, 2009; Svensson & Wihlborg, 2010) is a driving force throughout Europe and worldwide, and the BP is a strong part in that force concerning Europe. Drawing on our previously conducted reflective study, which was part of an EERJ (European Educational Research Journal) special issue (authors, 2010), we wanted to find out if any research had been conducted that took a critical stance on matters linked to the BP. We intended to do this mainly because the results from our previous study as well as others showed, that rather superficial Bologna Follow-up reports suggest an unrealistic and over-smooth policy picture of the higher education systems and their institutions (authors, 2010; Huisman, 2009; Neave & Amaral, 2008). These optimistic results presented at the initial stages (e.g. Bologna Follow-up Group, 2007) are over-confident at best and could be considered as ambiguous or even misleading. We reported that the picture drawn in these reports is much too promising, particularly considering that since 2007 the BP is supposed to have entered a more mature stage (ibid). However, the tone of the more recent declarations is milder than before: the 2009 Leuven declaration acknowledges that not all objectives have been met completely and allows for greater diversity of student population (Leuven declaration, 2009). The Budapest-Vienna declaration (2010) acknowledge the criticism at BP and state that critical voices should be heard. In the latest Communiqué, of Bucharest April 2012, the Ministers of Education identified three key priorities - mobility, employability and quality (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012). The declarations consequently emphasized the importance of higher education for Europe’s capacity to deal with the economic crisis and to contribute to growth and jobs. Automatic recognition of comparable academic degrees as a long-term goal of the European Higher Education Area was another commitment made by de ministers (European Commission, 2013).

Our previous research focused particularly on what is going on at a meso and macro-level and initially It seemed that the Bologna Process gradually transformed from a voluntary network of higher education organisations into a new form of governance, where the national authorities play a major role and the system levels conditions for determining the BP in practices are becoming more and more fixed foundations, based on increasing standardisation and transparency (e.g. Adelman, 2009; Dahl, et al., 2009; Wihlborg, 2009). Against this backdrop, the overall purpose of this current study is to further explore and access knowledge about effects of the Bologna Process in Europe by providing a
longitudinal literature overview based on research studies published in the database ERIC (Education Resource Information Center, EBSCOhost), enabling a focus on some critical viewpoints. In order to do so, we conducted a systematic literature search, and consequently analysed and discussed the results leading to a reflection on present and up-to-date central policy documents about the BP.

Intention is to move forward in our understanding of the Bologna Process by emphasizing our previous assumption: that a critical stance on the BP is urgently required and that this should also include the consequences that follows on this reform process. The curriculum discourse concerning BP implies a rather open and creative development of the higher education sector but its rather ‘cementing way’ of implementation, lacking sensitivity for creative variations and innovative developments should not be neglected (Adelman, 2009; authors, 2010). Becoming employable, throughout Europe, is also a strong force behind the idea of the BP which also strives for unification, rather than variations, concerning competences, skills and abilities (Wihlborg, 2009; Avery & Wihlborg, 2012). The BP directly influences most European educational systems and their teaching and learning practices, Nilsson & Wihlborg (2011), in a very substantial manner, and considering that the BP has operated since 1999, we assert that providing a more systematic and critical reflective view about the BP and its implementation process is an important and legitimate concern to address.

Framework

First, we turned to the EUA (European University Association) documents about trends in European higher education. We are using the following steppingstones (Sursock & Smidt, 2010) as they illustrate, the inherently controversial character of the BP that is of interest in our literature search, and frame our point of direction and research inquiry:

(i) Critical reflections about the concretizing of *internal and external quality assurance processes* involved in the BP discourse. ‘Are internal and external quality assurance processes supporting the modernisation agenda of higher education institutions, their strategic orientations and the requirements of knowledge-driven societies?’ (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p 95).

(ii) Critical reflections about the use of indicators: ‘Is the use of indicators or criteria sufficiently flexible to support the diversification of national higher education systems?’ (Sursock & Smidt, 2010, p. 95). The conditions are that on an ‘European level the challenge is to support diversity across – and within – 46 countries while adhering to unifying principles and values’, and also that ‘common standards’ must be framed in such a way that they do not stifle diversity, innovative teaching practices and creative research, and that they do promote quality levels substantially through the central role of HEIs.’ (ibid., p. 95).

These stipulated and unification intentions represent the core nature of the BP. Together, both (i) and (ii) show a contradiction, as on the one hand, the Bologna intentions attempt to stimulate comparability, and search for equality of higher education provision at macro level. On the other hand higher education institutions should supposedly be able to compete, support creativity and stimulate innovative developments at the level of the individual courses at the micro level (Huisman, 2009). This contradiction between homogeneity versus heterogeneity is an essential cause for the creation of strains within the ongoing Bologna Process, as both parts of the coin apparently need to be present in coherence, at one and the same time (authors, 2010).
Second, in trying to improve our understanding of the actual, empirical developments caused by the Bologna Process within the higher education systems in Europe, we ground our discussion on a collection of policy documents concerned with the BP and furthermore, a longitudinal search and analysis of research studies found in research databases (ERIC). Given the complexity and the impact of this process, which has been going on for more than a decade, it should be noted that at least up to 2008, there were few studies that took a distinct critically stance on matters concerned with the BP. However, now such studies are increasingly, even though still sparsely, available, despite that they are mainly focused on the micro level. To our knowledge a systematic, longitudinal overview of such studies is currently unavailable. Therefore, our attempt has been to trace, frame and draw from policy documents and research studies about the BP, by selecting those retro perspective studies providing any attempt for conducting a critical view, in order to adopt a more balanced picture of the ongoing Bologna process and higher education in Europe.

An overview – The BP policy guiding the higher education sector in Europe

Considering the vast amount of policy documents and research papers describing, investigating or discussing the BP, reviewing and reporting the whole field and doing justice to all reports, spanning over the last decade concerns an extensive task. As mentioned above, there are plenty of documents emphasizing the beneficial sides of the BP, repeating its goals and its mission for making the condition for the HE sector in Europe better in various ways. What we are aiming at in this paper will focus on what is said about critical issues raised, viewpoints of percussions, and reflections about what are not desirable outcomes. Our overall aim is to find out if any studies took a critical stance as a perspective in any of the empirical and if so, what are the major outcomes of these Studies.

Some major issues already visible concerning the Bologna Process at macro & meso level

In contrast to the Bologna Follow-up Group, the works by Huisman (2009), Neave & Amaral (2008) & van der Westerheijden et al. (2008) showed that the implementation of the Bologna Process did not go as straightforward as originally expected, specially in the new coming countries. For example, there is the unification issue regarding structural elements such as the ECTS, diploma supplements and quality assurance regimes (e.g. Westerheijden et al., 2006). Diploma supplements have been introduced as an extra document to the bachelor’s or master’s degree for graduating students in 30 out of the 46 countries, in order to encourage international mobility and comparability of degrees (Sursock & Smidt, 2010). This resulted into a miscellaneous pace and content of implementation, involving a ‘highly complex cultural and social transformation’ (Huisman, 2009, p. 249) and countries seemed to have found ‘specific national solutions to challenges of the Bologna agenda’ (Huisman, 2009, p. 250).

Quite similarly, the extensive study by van der Westerheijden et al., (2008) showed that although the BP plays a major role in all the developments in the higher education systems, there are large differences in the speed of implementation between the individual countries, resulting into an EHEA (European Higher Education Area) with different stages of development and levels of commitment. This depends greatly on the starting point as well as the resources and expertise provided by the countries (van der Westerheijden et al., 2008). While the BP attempts to emphasize the importance of coherence in the EHEA, Benneworth et al., (2011) focus on the diversity between these systems, such as investigating themes that are clearly BP related. This leads the BP into a path where the focus will be on dealing with differences from a whole other angle, with alternative questions appearing into the spotlight. Consequently, the outcomes of the Bologna Process so far can be summarized as convergence at a
macro level, coinciding with greater diversity at a micro level (see e.g. van der Westerheijden et al, 2008; The Bologna Process 2020, 2009). A more recent example of a study, providing an alternative, more multidimensional perspective on the BP, is the work carried out by Brøgger (2013). She states that the BP should no longer be considered a linear and rational decision-making process, but instead that ‘the Bologna Process is more than the declarations, the communiqué’s and ministerial orders, but is something continuously being ‘performed’, reshaped, expanded and changed through negotiations between these multiplicities of worlds’ (Brøgger, 2013, p. 20).

Given the paradoxical strains of these outcomes, we aim to draw attention to the questions raised by these issues and by the use of our ‘steppingstones’ as stated earlier: and by doing so, hope for a critically reflected debate on issues concerning educational policy in an international perspective as being of great concern when developing the BP the next decade to come and into the future. As explained in the above, it is our intention to scrutinize several developments raised by the implementation of the Bologna Process in the higher education systems. By analysing research that deals with critical viewpoints, we search for evidence that would balance the oversized positive picture about the BP. Because of the current and future importance of the BP for the HE sector in Europe over time, and the decades to come, the survival and continuation of higher education systems will be affected. We therefore find it important to raise awareness of the actual impact of the BP, given that compatibility with BP provides an important selection mechanism, while perhaps equally interesting and innovative movements and social flows may be ignored, because of their incomparability.

Therefore, policy documents and research studies are evaluated with a focus on the developments caused by the Bologna Process within higher education systems, in order to answer the following research question: Which parts of the Bologna Process involve equalizing, uniform and homogeneous developments and which parts stimulate differentiation, competitive and heterogeneous developments? And to be more precise, to what extent are these developments focussed on the political rhetoric involved with BP or do they emphasize the actual impact on the higher education systems? In order to grasp this picture some inclusive and exclusive criteria will be used in our literature search concerning the empirical research studies that will be further outlined in the sections below.

The overall focus of our literature search is compassing research about the BP that in some way mentions any kind of critical statements and/or any kind of reflections by using the contradictions and differentiations mentioned. The review will not initially grade or value these statements at a first selection.

**Research Method**

The study involves two parts, one focuses on policy documents concerning the higher education sector in relation to the Bologna process in Europe. The results from that part are incorporated in our background and discussion. The second part is a literature search and review focusing on retro perspective critical reflections and viewpoints in relation to the Bologna Process, based on a selection of research studies. The search method and the analysis process involved are further outlined below.

The literature review intends to establish an up to date position on our topic. The rationale, based on Hart (2003a, 2003b), for conducting a literature review is to be able to get a relevant and up-to-date overview about the topic, consequently providing some critical points of current knowledge about BP and its consequences. Bearing in mind our overall statement that compared to the importance of that
has been written and discussed about the BP rather few studies have been conducted from an explicit critical standpoint. We have therefore decided to carry out a targeted review in one database that holds studies about education and policy concerning higher education. To do so, it is important to carry out he process of reading, analyzing, evaluating and summarizing scholarly materials about a specific topic in a systematic way. We did this to frame the critical studies available, and consequently, enable a review, which covers both a longitudinal approach and more specific viewpoints.

**Data collection and analysis process**

In order to select relevant studies and data we have turned to the international database ERIC - Education Resource Information Center (EBSCOhost) focusing on social sciences an education. In order to enclose data which was manageable and relevant, some additional pre conditions for the search have been stipulated: Studies published between 1st of January 2004 and 1st of March 2013 and written in English are included. We chose these dates, because we wanted to include studies concerning the implementation phase of the BP, such as the reflections in relation to quality assurance and diversifications. Since we did not want to miss out any of the current outcomes of the BP, we decide to incorporate all studies available until March 2013 in our literature search.

**First phase**

The international database ERIC was used to search data (research studies), the following inclusion criteria were used in different combinations: Bologna process AND reflecting/reflection/reflections, criticism, educational assessment, assessment, quality, critical analysis, critical review, comparative studies, retro perspective, students attitudes, students experiences, teaching, all in the purpose for framing the topic for this study. This first scan of the field comprised 161 studies. For pragmatic reasons, we split our investigations into two parts: 2004-2007 (phase 2) and 2008-2013 (phase 3), bearing in mind that the full implementation of BP started in 2007.

**Second phase**

In year 2004-2007, 9 studies were excluded initially due to not dealing with any aspects of the BP and 3 studies due because these turned out to be dated before 2004, leaving 149 studies to become reviewed further. Closer scrutiny of the abstracts resulted into a further reduction, and from the period between 2004 and 2007, eventually 32 studies were included for further investigation, while 6 papers were excluded due to being too loosely related to the BP or too hypothetically written (see table 1 for an overview).

**Table 1 in here**

**Third phase**

This phase involved analysis of the more recent studies between 2008 and the first of March 2013, as a distinct criterion, only peer-reviewed studies were included. The authors read the abstracts once more, which resulted in exclusion of more studies since they were not dealing with a distinct aspect related to the BP. If the abstract was vague or ambiguous in some way the whole paper was retrieved and read by either of the authors. When it became obvious that some of the studies did not discuss the BP as such, or not in a reflective manner these were consequently excluded as well. For this phase, all the remaining articles and studies were read through in full length by either of the authors. On closer scrutiny, still 13 studies had to be excluded for similar reasons as in the previous phases. Out of all studies between 2008 and March 2013, 59 (including 3 books) studies remained, which could be added to the previous 32
The fifth phase involved the interpretation of the overall meaning of the themes

In this part of our analysis and further synthesizing of meaning, we developed a more distinct understanding and knowledge of the topics based on all 91 articles. The review highlighted substantial data through the important key elements previous identified. The main outcome is first, that critical viewpoints regarding the BP actually did occur in our data, but that this topic is rather under investigated compared to the ‘pro BP dimension’. It should be noted that only a few of the studies did take a critical stance in reflecting on the BP and even fewer studies used a critical point of view of the BP as their main objective. The merging of some key elements which interrelated to a large extent lead to the following three main thematic areas concerning the character and meaning of critical viewpoints about the BP outcomes and potential, sometimes non desirable outcomes. In order to do justice to the differences in nature and content of the studies, we use the following themes to illustrate our findings distinguishing between Challenges (in all 62), Tensions (in all 43) and Critical Standpoints (in all 24), these are outlined in the result sector (see table 2). Also indicating that some of the studies overlapped, and consequently, became positioned in more than one of the themes.

Results

The papers that have been reviewed and analysed concerning the BP can be placed in a certain order, differing from taking a mildly critical stance, by referring to possible disadvantages towards using a critical viewpoint on Bologna as the central topic of discussion. Within this order, we distinguish the three following themes: Challenges, involving studies about potential disadvantages caused by the BP, tensions, referring to the incompatibility of certain BP measures and third, the studies that take a critical standpoint, exploring and analysing the actual problematic or biased consequences of the BP. There is however some overlap between these three themes, some papers appear in more than one category.

Some illustrative quotations from the articles are provided in relation to the abstract description of the general meaning in each theme. In the running text some of the 91 papers (see the total list of all papers included in the analysis) are also mentioned and we choose to mark these with an* in the reference list.

This hierarchy of themes is visible, for example in the pattern revealed by the studies selected and reviewed from 2011. Whereas in some studies a rather mild perspective is being used, e.g. when stipulating that not all BP goals have to be achieved, Rauhfargers (2011, as an example), or in a
discussion that not all BP objectives are necessarily shared, Cernetic (2011), or more focused, in a comparison between Finland and Austria, concerning QA systems, and how they are coping with globalization, Bernhard (2011). Still other studies provide a more fundamental level of criticism, when they worry for the domination of the BP, Corbett (2011), or develop a critical perspective on QA (Haapakorpi, 2011). It gets even more interesting when various countries are being discussed; while the study on Romania apparently provides an overview of the current status quo, Damian (2011), the study on Ukraine and Russia emphasizes the difference between official documentation and the actual situation, Luchinskaya & Ovchynnikova (2011), and a third study on Serbia provides an even more critical assessment of Bologna (Despotovic, 2011).

Challenges – Papers belonging to this theme are showing viewpoints discussing out issues that can be considered potential difficulties for the higher education system, e.g. studies that involve whether higher education institutions are ‘preparing for the future’ and which consequences are to be expected from BP. These expectations are outlined and compared in terms of how things might turn out eventually, both on institutional and national level. The discussion of such potential difficulties can lead to reasoning about the current challenges when adapting to the BP.

An example of a paper discussing such ‘challenges’ is authored by Greenwood (2009). He uses the BP ideas to look at the US higher education system, and attempts to explain the problems of the current US higher education system by using the developments introduced by BP (accountability, accreditation). The paper is more a political pamphlet and uses a very critical perspective. Despite a rather weak link with BP, the complications and difficulties of the accreditation process and the ambivalence concerning the improvement for teaching quality are all very recognizable and relevant themes.

An illustrative quote: ‘Rather than recommending that either the US or the European higher educational systems adopts a particular programme, this essay is intended as a way of opening a dialogue between those with substantive empirical and policy interests in higher education reform in the US and Europe,...’(Greenwood, 2009, p. 2).

Another paper that address the issue of challenges in terms of a comparison between Finland and Austria, involves the work by Andrea Bernard (2011). She uses expert interviews to focus on the challenges of quality assurance in higher education. An illustrative quote from the Conclusion: ‘Countries which react more effectively to these pressures concerning a decline in income and an increase in competition between institutions as well as for the best students are expected to be in possession of a functioning quality assurance system that is able to face the challenges of the upcoming decades. In showing how higher education is influenced by quality assurance this study has aimed at providing more clarity, but also at making a plea for higher education institutions which are not yet on the road to doing so to take steps to assure their quality’ (Bernard, 2011, p.591).

Tensions – This theme frames studies that ‘put X 'against' Y in the process of adaptation to the BP when it is taking place over time. These studies concern comparisons of either already experienced outcomes or expected outcomes in those developments that are still on the run. Sometimes critical comments are mentioned, but these are directed towards potential changes and adjustments to the BP.

An example of a paper describing the BP tensions is authored by Cernetic (2011), the paper considers the issues of massification as opposed to educational quality, illustrated with several examples from academia, such as the conflation of two types of degrees and the effects of cost reduction through competition. The paper ends with some avenues and reflective questions.
Another example concerns the paper by Portela et al. (2009), investigating the preferences of Spanish students when choosing their academic program and the advantages and disadvantages of a common degree structure by means of a large survey. They consequently provide insights into the speed of the BP implementation. The results of this study ‘confirm a positive impact of the Bologna process on the demand for programs, which varies with program size and across fields of study’ (p. 470). Portela et al. ‘uncover that being a program leader, i.e. the only institution in the country that restructured a given program, was associated with higher demand by prospective students, which nevertheless stemmed from their “second best” options and not from their first choices’ (p. 471). Portela’s study reveals that the implementation of BP causes tensions, as the coexistence of old and new systems ‘has most likely favored the surge of controversy on its implementation among higher education institutions, students and labor markets’. Portela et al use Crosier et al. (2007) to explain that such controversies result from different visions on the nature of the reform and from insufficient transparency and information conveyed by higher education institutions.

**Critical standpoints** – framing those studies that start with the experiences of a dilemma or other problem and take as a starting point an issue on various levels, such as department, institutional & organizational, regional or national level. The studies in this theme actual take a critical standpoint and in the light of this, discuss, problematize and scrutinize the actual consequences of BP.

A very interesting example of such a critical paper involves the work by Dahl et al. (2009), providing an overview of the three systems of grading in Scandinavian countries, and explains the consequences of BP for the ECTS. The paper provides detailed overviews of the Danish, Swedish and Norwegian grading systems and makes clear how supposed transparency as propagated by the BP only functions at the superficial level, demonstrating that creating transparency is merely an illusion (Dahl, Lien & Lindberg-Sand, 2009).

‘.... the translation of grades only works on a superficial level. The grading scales designed are fundamentally different as classification systems; they attach different numerical values to grades with identical labels and they relate differently to norm- and standards-referenced judgments of learning outcomes. The information condensed in similar grades from the three countries cannot be equated. The vision of simple transparency turns out to be an illusion’ (Dahl et al., 2009, p. 75).

Another example is the paper by Luchinskaya and Ovchynnikova (2011), providing an overview of the current status quo of BP in Russia and Ukraine at national policy level, two rather peripheral countries in this context. While their papers starts off with suggesting ‘that while Ukraine may have implemented more of the Bologna Process objectives overall, including ECTS and the degree cycles, Russia has made progress in the diploma supplement, and both countries are at a similar level of quality assurance’.

However, further on, they describes a reversal of official rhetoric, initiated by President Putin, expressing his fear that the new degree system may ruin what remains of the Soviet system of education. The authors consequently conclude: ‘that the Russian officials have joined the BP out of the questions of prestige and competitiveness, consider the BP a foreign policy rather than an education issue and use its non-binding character to pursue only slight changes in the system of HE.’ (ibid, p. 30).

**Conclusions**

When perceiving the results of our literature review, there are three relevant findings:
First, our literature review shows that related to the importance of the BP, the number of studies using a critical or at least reflective perspective is relatively low. Closer scrutiny revealed even fewer relevant studies. Consequently, we broadened our selection categories to studies discussing hypothetical challenges and tensions. Interesting, while the total number of relevant studies has not increased significantly over the years, on average share of studies using a critical stance grew extensively, from one out of 10 studies in 2007 to 8 out of 14 studies in 2010.

Second, when going back to our framework and research questions: identifying aspects of the Bologna Process in terms of involve equalizing, uniform and homogeneous developments and which parts stimulate differentiation, competitive and heterogeneous developments? If and how, do these developments focused on the political rhetoric involved with the BP emphasize the actual impact on the higher education systems? We demonstrate here in line with Huisman (2009, p. 7-9) and Neave & Amaral (2008) that following the Bologna Process intentions, the development in the HE sector have at large brought structural convergence, launching a discourse that will decrease the influences of diversity. At the same time, actions have been roused showing a tendency of creating counter reaction on national and on local institutional levels, trying to deal with various diversity aspects. Huisman (2009) asserts that there are four possible explanations for these inconsistent (convergence-diversity) outcomes, two of them are relevant for interpretation of our findings.

The first involves the idea of translation, implying that ideas change as they travel and that national policy may be implemented in order to solve rather national and administrative problems while the BP is rather used as an excuse. For example, the study carried out by Dahl et al. (2009) shows that when attempting to achieve transparency in the grading systems across three Scandinavian countries this turns out to be a mere illusion. A second relevant explanation involves the questions of quality in HE implying that due to BP knowledge development may become less sensitive for diversity and variations, resulting into a weak reinforcement of innovative and creative thinking, and in practice, then not allowing new forms of teaching in the classroom (cf. concerning different angels on this subject matter: Dahlgren et. al., 2008; Dysthe & Webler, 2010; Jensen & Michel-Schertges, 2010). The third explanation involves the political elements of policy and decision making, meaning that the policy process is even more strongly affected by historical legacies and path dependencies, consequently no longer open to unexpected turns and creative outcomes, as these are not framed in the BP. This is being revealed by the Russian paper by Luchinskaya and Ovchynnikova (2011) demonstrating that Russia only joined the BP for reasons of prestige and window dressing, and that the history and reputation of the Soviet system are stronger than the impact of BP, quite similarly to what Dahl et al. (2009) expose in the historical differences between three grading systems.

Third, our study intends to increase awareness of the lack of critical studies available, which can consequently lead to a more balanced view of the BP. This review reveals that more critical research needs to be conducted concerning the evaluation of the consequences of BP, in order to outline its various undesirable effects. Further research into the effects of the BP implementation at the local level would highlight the differences and difficulties in the implementation of the Bologna objectives, consequently making visible that BP is clearly lacking in certain areas, unveiling its various undesirable effects. Subsequently, exposing the shortcomings of the European higher education system will eventually lead to new developments, making the system able to face the current and future challenges.

Our aim is to raise awareness and contribute to the discussion about this issue. The question we need to discuss more thoroughly is what consequences are to be avoided and which are to be strived for? Are
we striving for homogeneity of curriculum and syllabus in delivering fixed standardised and measurable standards, easy to compare grade wise? Or do the future European higher education systems need to prepare for multiple variations in order to be part of a global knowledge society? Then they may be continually allowing for innovation and creation of knowledge development and stimulating a culture for learning, consequently accepting variations and differences between national systems, institutions, employees and students.

Limitations

There are some limitations to our study, since our selection procedure occurred through a database in English, we are missing out studies in other languages, such as national or very specific studies. As such studies will very likely also demonstrate that ‘the devil is in the detail’, we may have missed some interesting viewpoints and relevant contributions to our debate. In addition, using several databases may have extended our numbers of papers selected. This is particularly true for studies from 2007 and before. In order to fill in the gap between the moment this paper was finalised (January 2014) and March 2013, a delimited search was conducted using the following terms: bologna process and critical/criticism/analysis/standardisation, but no new papers became available published after March 2013. The extent of our search is limited but nevertheless provides an overview of the field at this moment considering the delimitations mentioned.

As explained, the original purpose of our paper was to provide an overview of the pros and cons of the BP, in order to discuss the BP in a more nuanced manner and by using an epistemological perspective. We assumed wrongly that a great number of studies, critically reflecting and analyzing BP outcomes ought to be available by now. Due to the limited amount of studies available this was not possible. Instead, we have broadened our themes and have also included studies with a more moderate viewpoint. This resulted into a broader, but no less relevant overview. To conclude, the initial amount of papers was extensive, despite that only a few studies actually used a thorough critical view at BP, we consequently widened our selection criteria and described our review and selection process in a detailed and thorough manner.

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References


Table 2  Overview of the selected papers according to their year of publication and theme

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Challenge</th>
<th>Tension</th>
<th>Critical SP</th>
<th>Total number of papers</th>
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All studies are included in the references. Quotations are used as illustrations in the paper and are highlighted in the references with *. The total number of individual papers is 91. The number of 129 shows that some papers are positioned in more than one theme.