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Standardization of (higher) education in Europe – policy coordination 2.0?

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ABSTRACT

The European educational landscape is changing. Education remains formally under the sphere of the nation states and has traditionally been resistant towards EU involvement. Several recent initiatives from joint policy-making point towards increased standardization as a key element of European integration in education and higher education. The article builds on the notion of standards-based governance and outlines this as a distinct mode for policy-making in the EU, emphasizing incentives and voluntary implementation, the use of expertise and technical calibration, their quasi-regulatory nature of the process. The article draws on a number of empirical examples to show how standards have been used for higher education policy on EU level.

Introduction

We live in a world of standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000a). Standards are something we encounter in almost all of our daily endeavours. From computer programmes that follow specific rules, batteries that can be used in various devices, the sizing of shoes or even the actual measurement systems that are used. Standards can refer to technical compatibility or obtaining specific quality criteria. They provide order and common thresholds, therefore contributing to efficiency in interaction. In this manner, standards function as an important means to enhance coordination (Botzem & Dobusch, 2012; Brunsson, 1999), useful in complex multi-level systems.

Focus on standards as a way to increase quality and efficiency of education has also intensified in recent decades, emphasized by international organizations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Dowson, McInerney, & van Etten, 2007), in particular through the creation of standardized tests such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Standards have also entered the debate for EU policy-making in the area of education. It has been argued that standardization is a central feature of current governance arrangements in European level educational policy initiatives (Elken, 2016b; Landri, 2016; Lawn, 2011). While standards can be examined from various disciplinary and analytical perspectives, the key focus here is on examining the specific

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policy modes in the EU. The use of standards has become an element of the so-called soft policy coordination patterns in European integration in education that have become more prominent after the Lisbon agenda (2000), in particular the open method of coordination (OMC). In the context of the EU, standardization can be seen as a path towards building regulatory capacity and as a form of co-regulation (Borraz, 2007). However, they can also be seen as a distinct form for governance, in particular in sectors like education that operate within limited legal capacity for supranational policy-making, where expansion of regulatory capacity is unlikely.

There has historically been substantial scepticism from member states towards more European integration through supranational involvement in education and higher education policy (Corbett, 2005; Gornitzka, 2009). EUs fromal competencies are limited, in particular through the subsidiarity principle (Maassen & Musselin, 2009). However, since the Lisbon agenda, more flexible coordination through OMC-processes has been introduced (De Ruiter, 2010; Gornitzka, 2005). Current practices thus seem to suggest a transformation of overall integration patterns, away from supranational harmonization attempts to use of benchmarks, indicators and targets. A range of new instruments have been proposed and adopted. The key empirical puzzle here is, with everything we know about resistance towards supranational capacity building in the area of education, why can one observe this adoption of such instruments? This article argues that part of the explanation for this shift can be found in increasing standardization processes. Furthermore, rather than being an example of expanding supranational capacity, re-emphasizing intergovernmental approach, or being a question of multi-level governance, a standards-based governance approach provides an alternative pattern with distinct structure and logic.

In analysis of national level governance structures, the use of standards has introduced a quasi-regulatory approach (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000a; Higgins & Hallstrom, 2007). On the EU level, while standardization formally retains its soft legal approach and emphasis on coordination rather than supranational steering, its operational *logic* is thus closer to a regulatory mode. Thus, while being more flexible, informal and open on the outset, there is a quasi-regulatory logic underpinning the process. This difference is significant, as it allows for a rather informal bypass of Commission's formal competencies, allowing for more centralization and opportunities to diffuse particular policy preferences by the EU. Thus, as a policy mode it can provide a new configuration of relationships between member states and the EU, thus altering the configuration of multi-level processes in this area. One could argue that for policy areas such as education where competencies have been limited this is can represent a substantive shift. This article thus focuses on highlighting the specific characteristics of standards-based governance approach in the EU context; the way in which this has been exercised in the EU for developing policy capacity in education and higher education; and the consequences and implications of such an approach for European integration in these areas.

The article first outlines recent developments around use of standards that forms the basis for the argument in the article. The article then proceeds to discuss governance and policy-making as a set of rules, some of the main aspects of standards as rules, how standards are adopted and some of their key operating logic. This is followed by a discussion of EU policy modes and governance, as well as the role of standardization in light of existing conceptualizations and the implications of such developments. While the process of standardization is relevant for educational sector as a whole, the article primarily refers to higher education as a frame of reference.

Empirical puzzle: European higher education and proliferation of standardizing instruments?

On national level, attempts to standardize various aspects of higher education have become more prominent in recent decades – regarding issues such as what constitutes a qualification, national learning plans and curricula, professional certification of teachers, requirements for obtaining professor status, and so forth. To a large extent these trends can be linked to a more fundamental shift in educational governance, where standards have increasingly become a means to assure 'measurability' (Landri, 2016). Focus on comparability, compatibility and measurement have increasingly entered the debate in European higher education policy as well (Lawn, 2011). Having in mind some of the historical resistance towards European coordination in higher education, one could argue that a number of these developments can be seen as rather puzzling.

Perhaps one of the most significant examples of a standardization processes is the current wave of introducing National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) in Europe, largely driven by the EU-led European Qualifications Framework (EQF). This spread can be seen as surprising since the EQF is a recommendation, nor does the text itself require the development of a NQF. The Recommendation text states that national system that should be related to EQF, by referencing systems, and 'by developing a national qualifications framework, where appropriate according to national legislation and practice' (European Parliament and the Council, 2008). One can of course question the nature of 'voluntary', that is, whether peer pressure and naming and shaming would mean that adoption would be voluntary as research has shown that there can be strong compliance pressure in voluntary processes (Ravinet, 2008). However, what is also clear is that the process is not driven by hierarchical authority that could sanction compliance and European coordination in this area is something that countries willingly engage in, implying a sense of 'stretching' of the subsidiarity principle and allowing for initiatives that would perhaps been unthinkable ten years ago (Elken, 2015a, 2016b). There are also specific activities that have facilitated the process of standardization as a possible outcome. The development of the EQF was marked by a process of extensive consultation as a means to assure legitimacy and to persuade member states (Elken, 2015a). Furthermore, the EQF advisory group and the national referencing processes have become increasingly standardized, similar to what Sahlin-Andersson (2000) observed in her study about OECD Management group activities. That is, national diversity and ideological differences become downplayed; the use of expertise in the process is used as a means of justification and legitimation. At the same time, while spreading a notion of creating NQFs as a policy solution, the EQF is also not a neutral mapping device (Elken, 2015b; Cort, 2010), and it can also be seen as a particular institutional template, including policy-relevant ideas (Elken, 2016a).

The EQF is also not the only instrument, and in addition to some failed attempts (i.e. at creating common standards for vocational education), a number of successful initiatives can be observed. One example is the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) that was initiated already in the end of 80s but became widely adopted after the Bologna Process. Its implementation has been perceived as a bureaucratic and rather technical exercise, with little or no critical response on national level in some countries (Gleeson, 2013). Despite being a rather clear standard, it has been argued that its adoption was still rather varied (Karran, 2004), and likely remains so. An interesting aspect of the ECTS is

that it was first proposed as an EU instrument, but it is now being promoted through an arena that formally remains non-EU, and thus also extends to Bologna signatory countries beyond the EU. As such, it provides an example of an EU-developed standard that has now moved beyond EU, and has to a large extent also become widely taken for granted.

Yet another example if the Europass framework of transparency tools, with a stated aim to provide clear information about skills and qualifications. Europass is a collection of five documents in a standardized format, with a CV and language passport, as well as mobility record, certificate and diploma supplements. While development of Europass formally started in 1998 with the European forum on transparency of vocational qualifications, diploma supplement and language passport had initially been developed by Council of Europe (and UNESCO). The formal basis for including these various instruments into one framework was based on the Copenhagen declaration in 2002, leading to the introduction of Europass in 2003. What this bundle of documents provides is a common vocabulary and framework to describe competence, and thus a rather important step in developing common standards, having in mind the historical diversity of higher education in Europe.

Another more recent example is the European Skills/Competences, qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy. Being closer to the employment domain, its relevance is also closely linked to the EQF and the way in which the relationship between education and the labour market is transformed. Such classifications provide a standardized means to discuss skills and competencies across national borders. Again a voluntary instrument, it provides a common set of definitions for both job-specific and transversal skills and competencies. In this manner, it can also directly contribute to the way in which learning outcomes for specific occupations and professions are formulated. In addition to these there are more procedural standards, such as the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance and the European Charter and Code for Researchers. For example, studies on quality assurance have shown how the introduction of standards can also put limitations to working with enhancing quality (Brady & Bates, 2016), thus interfering with how such processes would look like without European standards.

These instruments also do not operate in a vacuum. The introduction and spreading of such instruments has largely taken place after the introduction of the Bologna Process (1999) and the Lisbon agenda (2000) in EU. While the first is strictly speaking non-EU initiative, the Commission has obtained influence in the process (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014), and it has now been seen as a core pillar for EU initiatives in the area of higher education. Thus, one could view all of these instruments as standards that structure the European Higher Education Area, by providing transparency, transferability, recognition and more mobility. One could argue that the prominence of such instruments would warrant the argument that they are more than being an element in a wider process of policy coordination. As will be later exemplified, there are also some important differences with a more traditional understanding of policy coordination. If one would view standardization as a means to construct regulatory capacity (Borraz, 2007), one should likely expect that these would also contribute to the neofunctionalist argument where one could expect an increased legal capacity over time. At the same time, there are few indications that this might be taking place in higher education.

Thus, one could argue that the way standardization has been employed can be seen as a specific way of organizing coordination. The more sociological perspectives on the process would thus emphasize the view of standards as epistemic objects that structure the overall

educational field (Landri, 2016) or and in this manner shape a common space for European education (Grek & Lawn, 2009; Lawn, 2011). However, one can also view this standardization process as a specific approach to policy-making and a version of policy coordination that has some rather specific elements, and thus proposing a specific view on how European integration can take place in areas that are formally constrained.

Rule-based starting point for standards-based governance

A system of governance can in principle be viewed as a set of interlinking rules. These rules determine among other things the balance of power between various actors, scope of formal authority, the possible objectives of policy processes, and include specific rules for how one would conceptualize success or failure when particular course of action is carried out. These rules can be either formal or informal: particular structures and processes operate because there is a legal obligation, following the logic of consequence, in other cases the rationale for compliance is more normative, and based on logic of appropriateness (March & Olsen, 2008). This formal–informal dimension is important, implying that it is possible that actual practices transcend existing formal patterns and structures. Even as there is no legal obligation involved, informal rules can become adopted and taken for granted. In essence, any governance system has both a formal and informal dimension that consists of particular kinds of rules. The specific balance between formal and informal dimensions will vary across sectors, issues and aspect of the process.

Standards represent a particular kind of rule that does not neatly fall under this formal–informal division of rules, suggesting they are a third distinct form of rules (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000a). A formal rule would be based on specific authority to issue the rule suggesting that the primary logic for compliance in this case would be coercion as lack of compliance has formal sanctions. A norm would be an informal rule. Characteristic for informal rules is that they are not always explicit – informal rules can be largely taken for granted and unarticulated. This makes it also difficult to identify compliance, as the source of such norms can be unclear, and the process of compliance can be habitualized. However, in broad terms one can argue that compliance is voluntary, as there are no formal consequences for non-compliance. Standards, however, provide a third alternative, as they are explicit with an evident source, while they also remain voluntary (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000a).

What distinguishes standards from other coordination modes is a single explicit and identified source that makes standards a template that is diffused with a quasi-regulative logic (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000a; Higgins & Hallstrom, 2007). This, rather than being a process of soft coordination, standardization becomes a process of diffusion of rules, with an asymmetry towards those with the ability to define the standard. The formal source can in principal be seen as the so-called 'standardizer'. However, the development of standards in general requires considerable expertise (Jacobsson, 2000, p. 41). Thus, standards are also not neutral, as the actor with capacity to select relevant experts will in this manner shape the process. The actors are those who engage in the process of collecting, editing and distributing information (Sahlin-Andersson, 2000), and thus produce standards. The legitimacy of standards is linked both to their scientific and technical rationality, as well as their negotiated nature suggesting of increased democratic principle (Borraz, 2007). Legitimacy concerns also highlight that the process of developing standards and diffusing them are inherently interlinked – what has been conceptualized as 'the recursive cycle

of transnational standardization' (Botzem & Dobusch, 2012). To assure legitimacy, both input and output have to be concerned, where stakeholder involvement is important for the former, and the characteristics of the standardizer and the procedures for setting the standard are central to assure diffusion.

Regarding the spread of standards, this tends to take place when there is not yet an established order (Djelic & Sahlin-Andersson, 2006). There is a basic assumption that actors who comply with standards do this because they have become persuaded that compliance provides order. This highlights the role of persuasion to assure implementation (Brunsson, 2000), and that both the source (standardizer) and the standard itself are perceived as legitimate and desirable. In trade and business studies, the adoption pressure is usually explained by market mechanisms that operate in a global environment with increased specialization where multiple products and processes need to be compatible (de Vries, 2013). However, while standardization is usually associated with convergence and increased homogeneity, there are several aspects that can challenge this assumption.

Having in mind that standards are rules that are rationalized and simplified (Jacobsson, 2000, p. 41), this implies that standardization process is also likely to play out differently depending on the object of standardization. As Mendel argues, 'it is generally easier to rationalize technical and physical entities than social and economic actors, which in modern times are more apt to be constructed as unique and autonomous', and one can further expect that standards that concern uncertain technologies emphasize procedural aspects (Mendel, 2002, pp. 410, 418). For social phenomena, standards thus also need to be interpreted on local level, becoming contextualized and translated (Czarniawska & Joergers, 1996), as descriptions of processes integrate with local institutional setting. This means that the national and institutional context is an important filter that filters the effect of standards (Mendel, 2006). While there might be incentives to adopt the standard, the way in which it is translated into actual practice and the outcomes it might have in particular national contexts might vary. Adopting the standard can also lead to loose coupling or de-coupling between the adopted standard and practice (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000b). Furthermore, standardization is usually a long-term process (Borraz, 2007), conditioned by the first adopters, as the adoption of the European Charter and Code for Researchers showed (Chou & Real-Dato, 2014). In the next section, we turn to how such approach would play out in the context of current institutional structure of the EU.

Standardization: policy coordination 2.0 in the EU?

Governance approaches and policy-making modes that are used in the EU vary across sectors, due to diverging legal competencies, regulatory capacity and main operational logic. While the EU has been described as a 'regulatory state' due to its primary focus on regulation rather than (re)distributive policies (Eberlein & Grande, 2005), in policy sectors where national interests have remained strong (i.e. education), the regulative role of EU this far has been limited. While the debate is still ongoing on the Europeanization vs. nationalization thesis in regulative domain, the existing 'regulative gap' between European and national level has been identified – and the EU in many cases lacks formal powers and institutional capacity to deal with this (Eberlein & Grande, 2005).

Having in mind this sectoral diversity, EU policy-making represents a multitude of distinct approaches to how policy-making takes place in practice, each also with distinct

Table 1. Five policy modes (Wallace, 2010), compared to standardization.

	Community method	Regulatory mode	Distributional mode	Intensive transgovern.	Policy coordination	Standardization
Degree of centralization	High	Varies	High but narrow	Low	Low to moderate	Varies according to formal/informal
Role of European Commission	Agenda setting, implementation and external	Agenda-setting and policing	Agenda-setting and implementation	Marginal	Developer of networks	Standardizer
Member states	Subordinated implementation	Implementation and reinforcement	Paymasters and beneficiaries	Key players	Laboratories and learners	Adopters and translators

division of roles and power between various EU institutions. In her work, Wallace (2010) identified five possible modes, varying according to the scope of centralization, the power and role of various EU institutions, the use of resources and the main policy sectors where these approaches are being employed. The *community method* is characterized by high degree of centralization and a hierarchical approach, and the European Commission as an executive body with a substantial role throughout the policy process – from agenda setting, brokering to actual execution. A *regulatory mode* would instead emphasize the legal aspects of rulemaking, emphasizing negative integration and removal of barriers between countries. The role of the European Commission in this context is more on agenda-setting, and 'policing' the process, and the degree of centralization can vary substantially. In the *distributional mode*, emphasis is on the redistribution of resources, making this of relevance for budgetary issues and cohesion policies. The role of the European Commission can be found both in agenda-setting and implementation. These three approaches all share that the degree of centralization either is high, or varied, indicating a level of supranational capacity for action. The remaining two modes for policy-making are characterized by low centralization. *Intensive transgovernmentalism* has main focus on member states also reducing the role of the European Commission to a marginal function. *Policy coordination* also emphasizes the member states, but it also brings in the European Commission as a key player in developing networks of experts, bringing in stakeholder groups and other actors, and using peer pressure, benchmarking and policy learning as key techniques in the policy process. It is particularly policy coordination that is characterized by the use of soft law (Wallace, 2010, pp. 92–102). In the context of the EU, the community method, regulatory and distributional mode would all suggest that the rules are formal and that there is an identified supranational capacity for policy-making. Policy coordination and intensive transgovernmentalism are much more dependent on informal aspects of rule-making for the implementation process, in that they emphasize persuasion and consensus, as well as low level of hierarchy and centralization.

The use of standards is not an unknown phenomenon in EU policy processes, it has been related to conceptualizations of 'neo-voluntarism' that has been used in particular in the area of social and employment policies to mark low capacity to issue binding obligations and use of various voluntary mechanisms (Schäfer & Leiber, 2009; Streeck, 1995). In general, EU involvement in developing standards has primarily been examined in light of the single market and industrial products. Here, standards were used as a form for co-regulation (Borraz, 2007). The use of standards can thus become a means to maintain control and at the same time avoid high organizational costs (Brunsson, 2000). The use of standards in EU education policy has also been proposed in existing research, discussing its role and function in creating and shaping specific policy spaces as networked and measurable (Lawn, 2011). The key argument in this article is that the use of standards is more than mere choice of instruments, as policy instrument choice in itself contributes to determining actor behaviour and uneven power balance between actors and policy problems (Lascoumes & Le Gales, 2007, p. 9). Lascoumes and Le Gales (2007) thus argue that instrumentation in itself should be seen as an institution, as they in this manner specify forms for collective action. Following this argument, a standards-based approach represents a distinct form of action and a governance approach (Borraz, 2007). Having in mind that the focus in this article is on the use of standards in 'new' and non-traditional sectors where the 'object' for standardization (higher education) has traditionally been resistant towards standardization

attempts, this kind of quasi-regulatory nature is also different than the experiences with standardization in constructing the single market or in policy areas such as telecommunications. Furthermore, the kinds of standards that are being discussed in this article can also be seen as 'quasi-standards', as the dynamics of the process is closer to the EU institutions, rather than being outsourced to standard-setting organizations or agencies. For EU governance it represents a new way to think about regulative capacity.

Having in mind the variety of policy-making 'modes' in the EU, a standards-based mode differs from those that have been outlined previously (see, Wallace, 2010 and Table 1 for overview). First, in terms of its formal scope of action, standardization as a policy mode resembles policy coordination in terms of its legal scope. Thus, this governance approach in the EU would have a similar role division between EU institutions as policy coordination mode and one could argue that, *formally*, the process remains decentralized. It is not driven by coercive mechanisms and requirements for compliance nor is it dependent on a shared normative basis for implementation. As implementation is based on incentives and persuasion of value added, standards can function in areas with low levels of institutionalization regarding joint coordination and in areas where existing legal capacity for coordination is low. It allows for coordination among units where actors 'do not necessarily have to share the same goal or the same ideas' (Brunsson, 1999, p. 115). In essence, a standards-based view is dependent on persuasion and consensus-building, as adoption of standards can be seen as voluntary. This consensus-based approach introduces a gradual aspect to the process in building support (Borraz, 2007, p. 68), where the sequence of persuasion can have an effect on the speed of adoption (Chou & Real-Dato, 2014). Furthermore, this consensus-seeking approach also suggests that the formally decentralized nature of standards-based governance is in practice much more centralized. In this line, one can argue that their voluntary nature is at least to some extent an illusion, as the adoption of standards can also became a TINA (there is no alternative) issue, once a certain scope of diffusion has been obtained and the costs of not following a standard become too high.

Second, despite their voluntary nature, the primary operational logic of standards represents more that of the regulatory mode. Even in economic policy where standards are frequently presented as a part of deregulation, the use of standards can be seen as a form of re-regulation in that they can introduce rules that supplement formal legislation (Borraz, 2007, p. 59). While voluntary, standards can also over time become 'much less voluntary than in their initial form' (Kerwer, 2005, p. 618). In the context of areas that have been resistant towards EU regulation, this can be a rather significant development as it represents a form of coordination that can exist next to the more traditional coordination forms. At a time where the current EU Commission is focused on doing more by doing less, such a mode can prove to provide precisely that.

Third, similar to other joint coordination processes in the EU, standards also emphasize the role of experts and expertise in constructing standards and reaching consensus. Expertise is what provides legitimacy to standardization (Jacobsson, 2000), in particular in the EU where the use of experts has been considered an important aspect in assuring legitimacy (Metz, 2013). However, in addition to experts, the development of standards is viewed as a process through which governance becomes networked by including new actors in the process (Borraz, 2007; Lawn, 2011). Thus, the use of standards also opens up the policy arena for new actors, new linkages, new constellations (Lawn, 2011). This would suggest that the production of standards is also not a neutral process. Despite relying heavily on expertise,

standards can sometime be ambiguous, standards can also provide opportunities for policy entrepreneurs to 'capture' meaning, even when standards are first viewed as primarily intergovernmental (Borraz, 2007, p. 59). Thus, while being expert-based and technical in nature, one can expect that a standardization process can also provide actors opportunities to further their interests. Being a more flexible conception of European governance, one can expect that the kinds of arenas and networks that are being constructed in the process can also be more informal, and operate beyond existing formalized practices. Having in mind that it is the Commission that has a gatekeeper role in selecting and inviting experts, one can also argue that the Commission has considerable power to decide which actors are involved in the process. This again would suggest that standards-based governance can also have elements of centralization, while formally remaining voluntary and open in nature.

Fourth, a standards-based approach also drives forward particular aspects of this ordering, focusing more on technical calibration. As soon as the use of standards enters the realm of social phenomenon, the standard-setting process is also no longer about specification of technical criteria of particular products. It has been argued that rationalization of social and economic actors has a more processual nature and would likely focus more on procedures, rights and roles, instead of outcomes and goals (Mendel, 2002, p. 410). Thus, as a policy-making mode, the use of standards as instruments then promotes a specific kind of problem formulations in the coordination process, with emphasis on aspects that *can* be standardized. This would not imply that standards are necessarily neutral or value free. The technical nature of such processes does not mean that they are apolitical (Frankel & Højbjerg, 2009). A particular standard can also become a carrier for policy ideas that can be transferred to national contexts as spillovers of adopting the standards. In this sense, standards can '[disguise] political power as technical form and consensual process' (Lawn, 2011, p. 269). These technical channels can also become carriers for political ideas, raising questions of the democratic legitimacy of such processes. This is similar to what Salamon views as the new paradigm in governance on national level, what he calls the 'revolution that no one noticed' where it is not only the scope of governance, but also the instruments that are being used that is being transformed (Salamon, 2002).

What emerges from this discussion is then that this governance arrangement that builds on what was earlier termed 'quasi-standards' is based on expertise as a means to construct legitimacy. It uses consensus-based approaches for policy-making and diffusion, but at the same time allowing for powerful actors to exert influence and capture the process. Furthermore, while voluntary, it can introduce a quasi-regulatory element to policy coordination. In the next section, some of the implications for higher education policy in Europe are being discussed.

Significance for higher education policy

For sectors such as education and higher education, key emphasis has been on policy coordination as a main policy-making mode, in particular after the Lisbon Agenda when OMC became an important means for policy-making (Gornitzka, 2007), thus introducing a considerable intergovernmental flavour to EU policies in these areas (Ertl, 2006). The significance of the Lisbon Agenda was that it marked a turning point in creating a 'new and autonomous political space', employing the use of quantified performance targets (Gornitzka, 2007, p. 172). In recent years, an increased use of standardization mechanisms

has been observed (Gornitzka, Maassen, Olsen, & Stensaker, 2007; Lawn, 2011). Gornitzka et al. (2007) highlighted three functions for standards – being an expression of norms, policy instruments or market tools. Furthermore, they emphasize that the use of standards in itself is not unknown for the higher education sector in the form of quality thresholds (i.e. through peer review), the novelty of these processes is that they have now been moved out of the academic domain and become a part of the political administrative toolkit. In that sense, one could also argue that the debates regarding standards one could observe more than hundred years ago (see, Brown, 1909, for a debate about standards in American higher education) is substantially different from the one that can be observed now in the context of EU coordination. Where the necessity for standards was coupled with the internal dynamics of educational institutions and processes, the use of standards as a policy instruments in a wider standards-based governance architecture presents a form of standardization that in essence functions as indirect control mechanism.

This development is significant for higher education for a number of reasons. As outlined previously, standards present a process of technical calibration driven by experts that masks a substantial change process. This increasingly technical nature of these processes that become decoupled from more political policy processes in European higher education landscape (Lawn, 2011). Thus, the questions of what higher education is, whom is it for, and how should it be governed become dispersed among a wider set of actors. The peculiar aspect of these changes is that while they all seem technical, some of these also have implications for the very content of education on member state level, and in some cases also curriculum design (i.e. use of ECTS or learning outcomes). By rationalizing educational processes, they emphasize measurability (Landri, 2016), thus arguably facilitating mobility across borders. Study points, learning outcomes, system structure, diplomas and descriptions of qualifications – all of these are elements that are becoming to some extent standardized across Europe. Perhaps this is also not surprising, considering the increasing complexity of environments that higher education systems are facing, tackling multiple logics and multiple objectives. Simple points of measurement in such cases can have an appeal, not unlike PISA or university rankings, despite all the criticisms.

Such processes are characterized by extended use of experts, who engage in the governance structure at new kinds of arenas, that are not always formalized (an example of such an arena is the EQF advisory group). As highlighted by Lawn (2011), such approaches create new kinds of networks and linkages. These networks are not powerless nor are they evenly distributed. As highlighted earlier, standards can also provide opportunities for policy capture (Borraz, 2007, p. 59). Not least, one should not undermine the role of the Commission in the process, and earlier studies have pointed out how particular actors can influence the process at particular points of time (Elken, 2015a). As a consequence, the standards that have been introduced can also function as templates for other policy ideas. An example of this process is the introduction of the EQF, and increased focus on informal and non-formal learning. This is particularly significant in terms of standards-based governance, being a means to diffuse additional policy ideas in a context where formal legal capacity for supranational governance is low.

While incentive-based implementation emphasizes the voluntary nature of standards, this distinction is not as clear-cut, in particular, as standards for education concern rather unclear technologies and often have a procedural nature. This means that they can be more ambiguous and thus also provide opportunities for national translations. From member

state level such standards can thus be also a strategic opportunity to introduce own initiatives under the umbrella of European standards. Examples such as the ECTS show how in principle voluntary processes become coupled to other processes and sometimes viewed as more binding. Perhaps more importantly, these various instruments also show a spillover effect and that at some point they become rather taken for granted. Spillover effects can for instance be seen in the case of EQF and ESCO – where one can see obvious links between the instruments. Another example of increased taken-for-grantedness lies in ECTS as an instrument – despite varied implementation it is unlikely that a country would now abolish the use of ECTS at this point, having in mind that the instrument is rather strong linked to mobility issues. As increased mobility is generally considered desirable, rationales to introduce instruments on national level that would prohibit this would be highly unlikely, unless there would be radical and major upheaval of existing norms and preferences.

Overall, looking back to the key elements of this 'quasi-standards'-based approach – it was argued that this would emphasize voluntary nature, quasi-regulative flavour with a higher degree of centralization, significance of expertise and a limited scope of policy problems unless they would become what was identified as templates. While the examples that have been used as illustrations here do show a focus on more 'technical' aspects of education, some of them also can provide to be significant in altering some of the core ideas of higher education (i.e. introduction of outcomes-based thinking in higher education Europe-wide as a result of qualifications frameworks).

Conclusions

The article first presented standards-based governance in higher education employing a form of quasi-standards. They are characterized by their voluntary nature and soft legal approach, while also representing a more quasi-regulative shadow over the process. With focus on the use of expertise, one can also argue that it is likely that such an approach would set some limitations for the kinds of policy issues that are being focused on. However, the instruments that have been highlighted here show also that their potential goes beyond the presumed limitations and that standards can indeed become also carriers for additional policy ideas. As the wider European integration project has been driven forward by both specific trajectories as well as processes of learning (Olsen, 2002), this standards-based approach can be seen as a way to overcome existing integration challenges, in particular in an era where the scope of activities appears to be on the decrease. In areas such as higher education, where the EU operates with limited competencies, which at the same time have since Lisbon become essential for contributing towards the shift to a knowledge economy, such standards-based approach can effectively provide a variation and form of an upgrade from existing coordination approaches.

Providing new governance arenas and structures, incentives for implementation despite formally voluntary nature, re-emphasizing the role of experts and creating new forms for linkages, enhancing opportunities to spread particular institutional templates and models through voluntary adoption, this approach in general provides a quasi-regulative dimension to existing decentralized policy coordination approaches. It represents a way for member states to move closer in a rather heterogeneous policy sector, without simultaneously threatening sovereignty nor creating heavy burdensome structures. Constructing these approaches around common shared and unquestioned objectives (enhancing mobility,

efficiency, transparency, knowledge economy), a standards-based is built on inherent incentives that are taken for granted and can thus facilitate voluntary compliance. As has been argued in this article, over time this can create a point of no return in terms of possible scope of change as much of the framework for the policy sector is increasingly becoming standardized. Of course, in line with literature on standards in general this would not necessarily imply convergence or homogenization – it is both possible and likely that standards are also translated to national context and that there would be substantial variations in the way this is done. At the same time, standards represent a step towards more common ground, by creating shared sets of vocabularies and measurements, through taxonomies, frameworks, and guidelines. Furthermore, as is the case with ECTS and recognition, it also shows how some of these aspects go beyond formal EU territory and interact with other intergovernmental processes that drive forward such an approach.

Lessons learned from the use of standards in constructing the single market showed that even when intended as instruments for intergovernmental negotiations, standards can also become tools for supranational governance (Borraz, 2007). However, rather than being an extension to supranationalism, it can also be seen as an alternative, a form for 'political adaptation to a multifunctional environment' (Peña, 2015, p. 67). At a time when the wider European project is increasingly under question, among other things due to issues of migration and diminishing trust in the European project as a whole, one can wonder whether such an approach can also be a possible alternative mode for the European integration project to move forward.

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