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Paper and Poster Proposal

[Borrowing Concepts and Structures: Policy Patterns in Post-Soviet Higher Education]

Track [3]

Type of proposal: [paper]

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Structured Abstract:

Purpose of this paper:

[This paper is an attempt to explore one of the basic concerns of the higher education policy studies: *why the reform outcomes differ and what drives real change*. We propose a heuristic distinction between policy borrowing patterns that are based on imported principles (conceptual borrowing) or/and on structures that enable particular change (structural borrowing). Since policy borrowing can be considered as a mechanism of global convergence in higher education, we derived this distinction from world society theory (Meyer et al 1997), the remarkable concept describing this process.

Through this lens we examine the policy borrowing practices in the fifteen former-USSR states in the three fields of higher education reforms. Post-Soviet countries provide good examples of "island societies" (Meyer et al. 1997), as fifteen of them became independent nation-states a quarter century ago. The recent history of education policy transfers gives us an opportunity to identify the patterns of nation-states' behaviours under the global and local pressures.]

Design/methodology/approach:

[Policy borrowing is natural for states seeking national development and, in broader terms, their legitimacy in both their societies and a wider world. The growing global convergence suggests a trend toward global isomorphism (Meyer et al. 1997). Thus, the question of why countries perform differently becomes more interesting.

Some studies identify this difference in the "stages of borrowing" by separating guiding philosophy or ideology, ambitions/goals, strategies, enabling structures, processes, and techniques (Phillips and Ochs 2003, 453). Our less structured view intends to propose heuristics that might provide theoretical implications for analysis of policy-borrowing consequences.

We investigate the cases of several reforms that took place in almost all of the post-Soviet countries: privatization, European integration through the Bologna process, and the rise of performance evaluations. The comparative analysis provides distinction of patterns of policies and explores a balance between conceptual and structural borrowing.

In order to develop the idea we employ the standpoints of the world society theory: the ideas of global isomorphic pressures, decoupling between the intentions and outcomes of reforms, and expansive structuration as a compensating mechanism of this decoupling.

The structural overview lies on relevant literature on the reforms and aggregated data on national higher education systems on 15 post-Soviet states.]

Findings:

[*Conceptual borrowing* occurs when a state redesigns the core of the education system. It adopts some basic guiding principles for the system from the globally recognized set. *Structural borrowing* involves importing mechanisms that aim either to fix some identified problem in the short run or to create a specific environment or institutions in the long run. Policy implementations can represent both types coexisting, but often some emphasis emerges. The overview of changes the three above-mentioned policy fields provides the practical evidence for observing the distinction.

The policies towards private sector demonstrate two patterns of states' behaviors. The first one involves adoption of the basic principle of privateness, or we may say the ideology beyond this element of higher education system (ideological conceptual transformation). The second pattern, which is widely spread in the former-USSR countries, is localized-concept transformation (e.g. privatization driven by cost-sharing rationale).

The Bologna process is a remarkable example of isomorphic action. Designed to ensure comparability, in fact the whole idea represents the blueprint of homogenization and universalization (Dobbins and Knill, 2009). Yet, we can see different rationales in the extent of reforms and their outcomes. Thus, we identify relativistic borrowing pattern, when the balance of adopting concepts or structures depends on the states' particular interests in "joining the club".

The third field of reforms involves governments' policies on performance evaluations in higher education. The emerging frameworks for evaluation of universities demonstrates one more fact of rationalization of higher education (Drori et al., 2009). On the case of Russian "monitoring of HEIs' performance", we detect the latent conceptual borrowing pattern. While being created for the local political goal of shrinking the oversized demand-absorption sector, the monitoring remarkably drifted to the concepts referring to the global trends: accountability, transparency, managerialism, etc. Several examples from other countries' efforts support this tendency.]

What is original/value of paper:

[The paper provides distinction between different types of policy borrowing in order to address the practical questions of rationales behind reforms, decoupling between outcomes and purposes, global and local incentives of change.]

Keywords: world society, education policy, policy borrowing, post-Soviet space, higher education, privatization, Bologna process, higher education rationalization

References

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