Title of the contribution	***Building Bridges for Transferring What?*** ***Isomorphism vs. Legitimacy***

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Building Bridges for Transferring What?
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Abstract

The paper seeks to understand how higher education policy from the European Community is transferred to developing countries and beyond. Particularly, this study aims to delve deeper in the actual implementation of quality assurance from the perception of seven Armenian tertiary level institutions involved in a tryout of the national quality assurance standards and criteria. The main findings explicate that setting too broad a standard and/or guideline creates room for a variety of interpretations leading to deviation from its original purposes, thus questioning alignment and therefore recognition. Alternatively, the model isomorphs, in the form of best practices transferred may generate legitimacy issues - a prerequisite for success. However, applying the quality assurance standards and guidelines accompanied by explication of the underlying philosophies and mechanisms does lead to capacity building, establishment of own models, thus legitimating the latter on one hand and aligning with EU approaches on the other.

Objectives

The European Commission, often in tandem with other policy transfer activists, suggests best practices, models and original solutions (Radaelli, 2000, p.26) to be diffused and transferred to both developed and developing countries wishing to join the European family. The issue that this transfer may arise is that of legitimacy of the transfer. As opposed to democratic rules and procedures for legitimating, the EU approach to policy transfer has been widely questioned (Andersen and Eliassen, 1996, Radaelli, 2000). Driven by quick changes promoted by the Bologna process the very principle of consensus of citizens has been infringed. This, in turn, questions legitimacy of the policies transferred from the developed countries to the developing ones, where the political, social, ideological and economic peculiarities demand a different approach for promoting integration into the European Higher Education Area.

The case becomes even more complicated when instead of deeper understanding of the reasons for policy failure to avoid it and driven by the idea of a quick fix the developing countries heavily draw on the best practice or ready models thus causing uninformed, incomplete and inappropriate transfer of policies. Another major point of concern is, to a greater extent, the transfer effectiveness, which depends on the local implementers, even in the event of a most coercive incidence of policy transfer. The latter can develop a 'hidden agenda', which will ultimately have a significant impact on the outcomes. As Scott puts it, the local implementers usually try to avoid irrevocable acts of public defiance opting to use 'disguise, deception and indirection, as tactics, while maintaining an outward impression, in power situations of willing, even enthusiastic consent' (1990, p. 17).

In order to deeper understand possible impacts of transferring western approaches to quality assurance in general and policy models in particular into a different context this study examines how the implementation of the Bologna principles takes place in a developing country. Against this background, the case of Armenia's higher education is relevant to explore. The changes taking place in higher education are particularly challenging for a former soviet country, which, after the soviet regime collision, has been facing the challenges of reforming the educational system to meet the needs of a democratic society. Besides the economic, political and social issues, Armenia has to deal with the legacy of several decades

of the communist regime deeply-rooted in all aspects of life, therefore, culture, beliefs, and values (Kozma and Polonyi, 2004; Zelvys, 2004).

With the aim to integrate into the European family, the Armenian government found itself in an urgent need to harmonize the architecture of its higher education system with the European Community one by prioritizing the integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) through following the Bologna Declaration principles. In particular, quality assurance has been capitalized with devolution of the authority to higher education institutions to establish internal quality assurance systems. However, with all the positive drives geared towards EHEA integration, the implementation modes open up issues for further debates.

In this study an attempt has been made to make visible the quality of approaches to transferring Western policies and their impact on the higher education. The research questions are:
1. How does the policy transfer take place and what is transferred?
2. What is the impact of the transferred models?
3. What are the potential solutions to the problems?

Theoretical Framework

In the era of globalization the role of policy transfer and its possible consequences has been widely capitalized. Of particular importance is why some policies find successful culmination while others bring about distortion and even degradation of values cherished for a long time. To analyze why some transfer is unsuccessful we draw from Dolowitz and Marsh's (2000) findings, which outline at least three factors that have a significant effect on the policy failure: (1) uninformed transfer, which is insufficient information about the policy/institution and how it operates in the country of origin; (2) incomplete transfer, that is missing crucial elements of what made the policy/institution a success in the country from which it was transferred; (3) inappropriate transfer, that is insufficient attention paid to the political, economic, social an ideological contexts in the transferring country.

Another point of particular interest is what is transferred. The main transfer elements, according to Dolowitz and Marsh (2000), can be categorized in eight domains: policy goals, policy content, policy instruments, policy programs, institutions, ideologies, ideas and attitudes and negative lessons. However, of particular cruciality is, as Rap (2006) suggests also transfer of a policy model, which is a more detailed and specific approach than policy itself. A stabilized interpretation of the origin, organization and outcomes of a policy becomes a policy model when it is used to validate and enforce the need for similar reforms in other places through a prescriptive set of guidelines for replicating its success. Rap argues that the success of a policy model is only a success within the cultural and ideological understandings. Moreover, the success of a policy model transfer is highly dependent on the network of active supporters enrolled in the proliferation of a policy, which should be constructed and promoted with the aim to understand its capacity to enroll actors and institutions that make policy. This capacity depends upon a wide variety of appeals to the human imagination, not only through language, discourse or texts, but through a much broader range of promotional means, practices, and events (Rap, 2006, p. 1304).

In line with Rap's plea, Fullan (2004, 2007) emphasizes another factor of major importance that is the capacity of the local implementers fed by change knowledge - the driving force of any kind of change. It is expressed through a deep understanding of the concepts, processes, and the values it bears, since only through deep understanding can the endeavors be appreciated and followed. Fullan proposes to consider change from two perspectives – the meaning of change and the process of change (2007). The crux of change,

as he states, is how individuals come to grips with this reality since underestimation of either the meaning or process of change eventually results in dilemmas in most of the cases:

> A missing ingredient in most cases is insufficient appreciation and use of what we will call change knowledge: understanding and insight about the process of change and the key drivers that make for successful change in practice. The presence of change knowledge does not guarantee success, but its absence ensures failure (2004, p.2, emphasis in original).

Actually, change knowledge acts as a facilitator of the change transfer process without which incoherencies and misunderstandings are unavoidable.

While exploring policy transfer, various data sources can be used, such as policy documents, evaluation reports, focus groups etc. A very relevant source that is rarely used in the Armenian context is the perceptions of the ones most involved, namely the higher education teachers and students. Relevant because they are the ones implementing the reforms on a daily basis in their own practice. Therefore, exploring their perceptions sheds light on how the end users experience the usefulness and the quality of the current changes.

Methods and Data Sources

In order to answer the research questions a mixed method approach was opted for. The data stem from a larger try-out of the quality assurance standards and criteria at seven Armenian tertiary level institutions that are involved in the change process. During the tryout of the academic programme self-assessment form, such research methods as document analysis, focus groups, questionnaires and observations were conducted. For the purposes of the current paper we use the data for the document analysis and focus groups only.

Tryout

In March, 2010, seven tertiary level institutions in the Republic of Armenia were approached to participate in the tryout of the academic programme self-assessment form developed by the National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance (ANQA). The self-assessment form consisted of seven criteria for academic programme quality assurance; each standard consisted of a number of sub-criteria/performance indicators, which revealed in detail the philosophy of and mechanisms for meeting each criteria. The academic programme in pedagogy selected for the tryout was the same in the seven universities. The rationale behind selecting the subject area was: teaching and learning is at the heart of the education process and the impact of the former on the quality of education is immense. Therefore, only the academic programmes with pedagogy major were selected. The criteria in the self-assessment explored the following aspects: (1) Mission and purpose, (2) design and approval, (3) the teaching and learning approaches, (4) student assessment, (5) teaching staff, (6) educational environment and internationalization, and (7) quality assurance.

The universities were asked to fill in the self- assessment form within three months. During the whole period of completion weekly meetings with the working groups of each university were conducted. The aim of the meetings were to refine the self-assessment form to make it more applicable and its impact more effective with the involvement of the stakeholders, to see the possible reactions to the new process and the prospects for tackling them, to explore the potentials of the most effective approach to quality assurance for the Armenian higher education.

The range of the issues explicated is quite broad and is beyond the scope of this paper. To concentrate on the impact of transferring policies and models, one of the major findings of the tryout, only four variables exploring teaching and learning approaches, student assessment,

and integration of the ECTS credits and installation of internal quality assurance mechanisms will be analyzed and discussed.

Document analysis

The documents analyzed were mainly the ones outlining the policies and procedures as well as the transferred models used for
- Internal quality assurance mechanisms
- Student assessment
- ECTS credits allocation
- Teaching and learning approaches

The documents were analyzed through content analysis (Denscombe, 2007) to decide the meaning of the texts using ATLAS.ti scientific software. The documents were first read with a focus on the policies projected, then the text was broken down into smaller units after which the major policies were categorized based on the underlying concepts of the ESG. Considering the first part of analysis is a tally of the items when various units occur (Denscombe, 2007), the frequency analysis of the units was performed. To provide for validity of the content analysis peer-debriefing of the results was conducted. During the discussions some discrepancies with regards to coding were encountered. Anyhow it can be attributed to the different backgrounds the authors have. In the end the authors came to a consensus.

Focus groups

Two types of focus groups were conducted, with students and the teachers. The questions for the focus groups evolved around the questionnaire results and had the same major categories, teaching and learning, student assessment, ECTS credits and internal quality assurance mechanisms. The focus groups lasted from 1 hour 55 minutes up to 2 hours 10 minutes. The focus groups were tape-recorded, transcribed to create written protocols and sent to the teachers and students for authorization. The focus groups were analyzed based on the coding system proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) with the help of ATLAS.ti 5.5 (2004) software program. We followed a so-called logical deductive approach (Charmaz, 2000), which means coding based on preconceived concepts derived from different sources as well as free coding to observe the emergence of new concepts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The analysis culminated in mapping and interpreting the data. An attempt was made to make sense of the individual quotes and steps were undertaken to see the relationship between the quotes, and the links between the data as a whole. To ensure reliability of the coding system both intra- and inter-rater reliability tests were conducted using SPSS statistical program. The intra-rater reliability, conducted in a three-week time span, was .96 (Cohen's kappa). Regarding the inter-rater reliability, another researcher coded a selection of 80 interview segments, which resulted in an inter-rater reliability of .82 (Cohen's kappa).

Results

While analyzing the process of the Bologna policy transfer the issue of implementation per se as a major impediment surfaced. The major finding of the study explicates that too broad a formulation of the transferred standards and guidelines may create room for a variety of interpretations and therefore, deviation from its original purposes and distortion, given the peculiarities of the cultures in which the standards and guidelines are planted. Alternatively, the transfer of readymade models may cause as much harm because of the potential

limitations each model has and may create barriers for deeper understanding of the policy transfer.

A major finding was misinterpretation of the policy while transferring broad standards and guidelines for the quality assurance. Prior to the tryout, the institutions in the sample were guided by a handbook produced by leading universities. The handbook, which translates the ESGs and provides the approaches of leading institutions to the matter, reveals the misinterpretation of the ESGs. In particular, the interpretation was narrowed down to the models that are extant at leading institutions. This kind of approach actually hinders deeper understanding of the underlying philosophies and mechanisms allowing for capacity building of the implementers and therefore creation of own models to follow.

In particular, within the Armenian context, as the findings mainly reveal, the higher education institutions do long to change. What causes frustration and, consequently, distrust and resistance towards the transfer is the way its implementation is organized. With regards to the modes of policy transfer it can be characterized, as Dolowitz and Marsh (2000) put it, as uniformed transfer since all the institutions in the sample stated lack of information and lack of change knowledge (Fullan, 2004) related to the transferred policies. Moreover, lack of knowledge on how the policy is operationalized in the country of its origin was stated. This same lack leads to transferring incomplete policies, expressed in readymade models missing the crucial elements, which made the same model a success in the country of origin. Last but not least, the models transferred turn out to be inappropriate because of insufficient attention paid to the political, economic, social and ideological contexts in which the policy was planted.

A bright example is the transfer of student assessment models and ECTS credit system. The former is the isomorphs of an approach adopted by a leading university in Armenia and then transferred to the rest. The transfer of the approach, which is backed up with technical conversions without deep understanding of *how* and *why* of the assessment, and therefore without applying the crucial elements that build on the capacity of students and makes him/her an active learner has brought about degradation of the value of education. Another example is the transfer of the ECTS, which in the long run turned out to be only a technical conversion of the student workload into credits leaving alone the elements attaching value to it – student mobility, recognition (the latter is not promoted even at national level), and accumulation of credits. While analyzing the focus group data, a major finding was that both students and teachers still fail to understand that the assessment system and credit system are not the same. It follows that because of the dearth of deep knowledge about the philosophies driving the two approaches and the underlying mechanisms, the transfer of the readymade models has brought about distortion of the intentions that each bears and therefore disappointment on the part of the actual implementers.

Yet another concern is teaching and learning approaches. In the self assessment the institutions mentioned application of innovative methods of teaching and learning geared towards student-centered approaches. However, the focus groups revealed that the approaches mentioned were interpreted as "student-centered" whereas in reality it turned out to be a mere adjustment to the practices the teachers are used to and therefore distortion of the whole philosophy and mechanisms for the student-centered approach.

On a positive note, the overall finding of the try out revealed that the ESGs accompanied by the underlying philosophies and mechanisms for educational process quality assurance do promote the changes at institutional level. Of particular importance is the role of the national quality assurance agencies that should act as promoters and facilitators of reforms and therefore enhancement. The implication is that transfer of the approaches allowing for capacity building to promote deeper reforms covering teaching and learning approaches,

student assessment, teacher professional development and the like is required if the issue of alignment with western approaches to teaching and learning is to be tackled.

Concluding questions

The value added of the presentation will be a discussion around the following questions:
1. How to make the policy transfer an effective one?
2. How to make the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance more applicable in the developing world so that to promote alignment?
3. How to promote the EU policies while providing for the legitimacy of the latter?

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