Global models, structuration and network power: autonomy and constraint in higher education policymaking

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Introduction

In this presentation I would like to explore policy convergence between national higher education states, particularly the diffusion of globalizing models. The focus is on governmental policymakers: their transnational networks, worldwide reference points, and the dilemmas they face in responding to the increasing global diffusion of powerful governance models, such as those associated with the New Public Management (NPM) and forms of external accountability and quality assurance. The notion of structuration is introduced to convey the inextricability of both autonomy and structural constraint for decisionmakers in globally-situated higher education states. A key aim is to understand some of the forces that drive policy internationalization, not least those associated with the network power of dominant models and standards. The perspective on global governance used here is that of social theory.

Globalization

To begin, a word on globalization. Prominent elements of globalization can be understood as the growth of shared forms of social coordination (social networks). Globalization is characterized particularly by the sphere of sociability and the desire for individuals to interact with each other in networks (or run the risk of social marginalization). This applies especially to governmental policymakers. In the current globalization, people (policymakers) have the desire to access networks.

The emergence of international standards particularly has enabled us to coordinate our actions on a worldwide scale following the compression of time and space by technology. Dominant standards enabling global social coordination – the conventions, rules, norms, languages and so on – display a form of network power. They become the means by which we gain access to one another. But in doing so, they tend to elevate one solution for solving coordination problems above others and threaten the elimination of alternative solutions.

Following Castells then, we might view contemporary globalization as consisting of interlinked worldwide networks (social rather than technical). A network is an interconnected group of people linked to one another in a way that makes them capable of beneficial cooperation (such as through the exchange of goods in markets, or the exchange of ideas). A standard defines the particular way in which a group of people is interconnected in a network. It is the shared norm or practice that enables network members to gain access to one another, thus facilitating their cooperation (as in global science).

Some standards as a solution to a coordination game become particularly influential points of reference. They have network power with a capacity to pull in people who might otherwise rely on other standards or conventions. Network power implies that a) standards are more valuable when greater numbers of people use them; and b) that after a certain ‘tipping point’ or level of adoption of a model, their ‘pulling’ power to non-adopters increases. Such a capacity serves as a constraint on individual choice which often appears out of local control or non-autonomous.
But such constraint are both entrapping and liberating – they provide access to important networks but they also appear to many as being difficult to influence. They privilege particular modes of access to powerful forms of worldwide social coordination. The network power of dominant models and standards derives especially from their normative strength (numbers and status of users particularly) which has a snowballing effect once a certain threshold of adoption has been reached. This normative strength (network power) then dominates any rationalistic evaluation of a model’s intrinsic merits by late-adopters.

Models and global diffusion

We find that conventional explanations for model and standards’ diffusion across countries tend to focus on a) formal inter-governmental agreement (EU); or b) conference-based deliberation in ‘policy communities’ (OECD, UNESCO); or c) as the common response by national policymakers to a similar set of external circumstances facing them all. Yet, a fourth approach appeals at least as much. National policymakers make higher education policy, for example, in the context of decisions taken by other autonomous states. And the choices of other countries produce constraints (and opportunities) that can lead to policy convergence or common model adoption. That is, aggregate outcomes/policies are as likely to emerge from decentralized, individual decisions as from acts of collective sovereignty, such as inter-governmentalism.

Certainly higher education research indicates that competitive and emulative processes by states help explain convergence around governance models (King 2009). Governments perceive comparative advantage and raised performance for universities and economies in other countries that introduce or possess specific governance arrangements, and seek to follow with similar reforms. Similarly, emulation of the US higher education system elsewhere is also quite pronounced (as in China and the EU).

More importantly perhaps, the models and standards that other states adopt can result in mechanisms of strong structural inhibition. Governance choices by national governments, while voluntary (freely-made), are not entirely autonomous (unconstrained) as they are significantly influenced in power terms by the models adopted in other countries. The increasing dominance of some models worldwide significantly reduces the perceived ability of non-adopters to realistically consider alternative schemas.

This is not to argue for unalloyed structuralism. Like all social actors, decisionmakers are free agents. But, in globalization especially, they are always looking ‘for places to meet’ – i.e. to join networks and avoid marginalization. This can reinforce the power of universalizing models and the network power associated with such models.

Policymakers are nearly always confronted by structuration dynamics – in which the free choices of individual agents (here, national states) generate structures of constraint which then act back on individual choice. Increasing worldwide adoption of certain standards and models enable thresholds of adoption, or ‘tipping points’, to be reached that then strongly compel non-adopters to fall in line. Certain models attain high levels of worldwide take-up and exert strong normative and network power. In such circumstances, extrinsic (normative), more than intrinsic or merit-based evaluations, determines subsequent adoption by other
nation states. Convergence on a set of global standards is driven by an accretion of individual choices that can be characterized as both free and constrained.

We should be clear that increased transnational networking by national policymakers reinforces widespread model borrowing, but does not fully explain it. The diffusion of standards, learning from others, and seizing ‘off-the-peg’ solutions by those that lack the resources or inclination to devise more customized national arrangements, are actions that nearly always require explanations involving both free choice and structural constraint. But action-based networking accounts for global model diffusion tend to under-theorize structural power in such processes and its interplay with and constraint upon autonomous choice-making.

Interpreting global models

Of course, standards and models usually are rather abstract and generic entities. It is this very generalizability and transposability that allow solutions to apparently similar national problems worldwide. Consequently, model universalization is subject to national and similar processes of adaptation and revision as they become ‘domesticated’. They undergo specific critiques and nuanced modifications of form and content in processes of substantive application, although without losing their inherent ‘DNA’. This dialogism and relative malleability sustains their legitimacy and also their network power by appealing to more potential adopters (although, of course, such malleability has its limits). Standards as rational designs provide a means of communication that allows the articulation of locally varying relations to such models, and facilitates local discussion as to how far harmonization and standardization should go. Such processes nonetheless largely enhance universalization rather than hinder it through a refinement of models and adaptation that enables their acceptability in quite diverse conditions.

Structures and network power

Although global model diffusion requires forms of local domestication this should not disguise the powerful structural constraint that universalizing schemas can exercise. Although the power of structures is not necessarily experienced in an oppressive way by agents (even though regarded as exercizing a form of dominance), certain models are able to settle the terms of access to important global networks in a manner that seems outside the direct influence of those participating or wishing to participate in such networks.

Structuration and the NPM

The NPM is a clear example, in higher education and other public sectors, of a globalizing model. (However, the NPM is not a ‘take it or leave it’ standard – it can be broken down, adopted piecemeal, and revised, and its elements or constituent standards may possess varying degrees of network power). Its diffusion is increasingly the result of normative network power exerting strong constraints on national policymakers to adopt the NPM model, at least once a certain threshold of ‘conversion’ of other nation states by the model is achieved. Although network power does not explain the origination and early dissemination of the NPM (often a variety of factors may be at work), there comes a point of diffusion where later-adopting countries feel more externally or structurally constrained to introduce NPM reforms than earlier adopters. That is, with widening diffusion, extrinsic pressures overcome more merit-based considerations of particular governance models.
However, as we have noted, *structuration* and the network power of models and standards do not operate mechanistically. While there is often a strong ‘pull’ towards globalizing standards, governance models globally diffuse through processes of elaboration and flexibility while retaining the overall coda of a new institutional arrangement. Nonetheless, our main proposition is that, with increasing adoption of a universalizing model by governments, the ‘structure’ in *structuration* tends to become more compelling than agency autonomy for non-adopters as a consequence of a model’s increasing network power.

This snowballing structural influence may be reinforced by changes in actor-based power dynamics. The wider political weakening of professional and organized labour, and the re-emergence of strong market rather than welfare states, as occurred in the 1980s in a number of developed countries, particularly Europe, was an important condition in providing the political insulation necessary for national decisionmakers to adopt NPM reforms. While all countries require such political conditions for the force of a model’s network power to operate strongly, it is especially important in the early adopting nation states. In the case of the NPM, radical domestic reform in the UK, and a centralized and unitary political system, provided the environment for institutional change in the absence of the network power that comes to characterize the policymaking contexts for later adopters as the model diffuses globally.

As such, we must be wary of attributing network power and even international influences as explanations for all processes of trans-national policy convergence. The NPM originated in the United Kingdom in the mid-1980s almost entirely for domestic reasons. Ideas were drawn on from elsewhere, notably the USA, only when they either supported reform intentions or provided illustrative examples. In France, NPM-like policies, such as institutional contracts between universities and the state, were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s in the absence of NPM rhetoric. NPM model awareness by French higher education policymakers hardly surfaced much before the mid-2000s. Reforms were seen rather as meeting particular French domestic concerns (Musselin and Paradeise 2009).

In France, as also in some other countries that came ‘late’ to NPM narratives, such as Germany (see Schimank and Langer 2009), NPM-belatedness nonetheless is still an interesting phenomenon for considerations of policy internationalization, particularly for the network processes underpinning it. That is, does the diffusion of the NPM model to latecomers signify an accelerating form of network power associated with that model? Did the NPM governance model reach a level of worldwide national adoption to the extent that previous non-adopters felt compelled to introduce it, too?

It is here that network power analysis may help explanations, especially when utilizing notions of *structuration* - the process identified in social theory by which agents’ freely-made choices create structures which in turn constrain agents’ decisionmaking (see Giddens 1984; Grewal 2008). Although there is an agent-based and voluntary dimension in *structuration*, *network power* highlights its structural characteristics. It refers to the standards – the in-built structure or programme for the network - which possess a form of power based on the ability to coordinate multiple-linked actors. This can lead to the eventual elimination of alternative standards.

A case in point is the increasing worldwide dominance as a global standard of the English language, which lacks any clear intrinsic benefits over many other languages in terms of, say, simplicity, but is an example of a standard’s normative or network power through
accelerating adoption worldwide by powerful nations and groups (Castells 2009:42-3; Grewal 2008:5).

Global path dependencies?

Path dependency, therefore, occurs at both the national and global levels. Path dependency at the global level occurs when network power helps to lock-in particular standards and norms (Grewal 2008). Only countries with a generally high level of global standing and relative unconcern with the models of other nation states have the capacity to ignore worldwide standards, such as the USA, as, for example, with its retention of the death penalty in the face of a wave of abolition in other democracies (Grewal 2008). It is the gathering number of followers for a model worldwide that results in increased normative or network power bearing on non-adopters. This, rather than any necessarily well-evidenced evaluation of the essential advantages of a model, increasingly comes into play for governmental decisionmakers.

The larger is the group of national adopters of a globalizing standard (such as versions of the NPM), the greater the reservoir of worldwide experience and knowledge available for enhancing such policies once they have been implemented. As with the purchase of electronic consumer goods such as telecoms and their networks, the more users a product has, the more secure the purchaser feels about the choice made. Countries may feel comfortable in following the crowd in reforming their higher education systems, not on economic competition grounds alone, but because it appears to be the safest action to take. As a model globalizes, the more such decisions are experienced as compelling (structural), rather than the outcome of autonomous choices. Moreover, the supply of ‘updates’ and the building of worldwide experience and knowledge for a particular model is also an important factor in adoption (or ‘purchase’), and this increases as the model diffuses.

Network power also is often reinforced by the tendency of countries to be imperfect evaluators. Like individuals, states as ‘bounded rationalists’ are not generally very good in judging processes in other countries and often rely on short-cuts or heuristics in coming to their views about adopting models from elsewhere. This may lead to a decision, for example, that it is best to rely on the accumulated wisdom of others and to adopt a global model without demur. But it may also lead to model modification as territorial decisionmakers seek adjustment to the standard to fit what are perceived to be a country’s specific historical, political and cultural conditions. In both cases, however, bounded rationality reinforces the pull of network power associated with globalizing standards and models.

Network power appears likely to be strengthened when globalizing governance models are found in countries with high levels of interaction with current non-adopting countries, or when both nations share perceptions of cultural and political likeness. Large variations in power between the countries may also lead to diffussion, as may that between a country and other countries collectively when international organizations such as the World Bank, for example, make adoption of globalizing standards a condition for providing loan and similar finance to a country in economic difficulty.

The gradual adoption by governments of increasingly globalizing models changes the policy context in which non- or late-adopting countries come to decisions. These externalities tend to result in national decisionmakers being less influenced by the direct advantages of a particular policy than by its normative power. That is, the natural advantages of a model or standard become less important, once a certain level of worldwide adoption has been reached,
than its network characteristics. The number and standing of those who have signed up to the model elsewhere is the key to its accelerating diffusion (Grewal 2008).

The normative power of models

A model’s global diffusion thus increasingly reflects its normative power, rather than necessarily any advantages inherent to the model, particularly once a certain level of worldwide adoption has been reached. Models diffused through international networks may attain particular ‘tipping points’ through a rising number of adherents, thus providing compelling pressure on non-adopters to sign up, consequentially weakening the power of alternative and competing models (Gladwell 2000; Grewal 2008:11). The model thus attains a ‘pulling’ capacity that accelerates with each additional adopter, while by definition weakening alternatives (Grewal 2008:4). Is the NPM, with its associated characteristics of markets, institutional autonomy and external regulation, for example, likely to become even more dominant globally in higher education, if not necessarily universal, because it is has reached a point in its diffusion that accelerates its pulling power to current non-adopters?

This is not to suggest an evolutionary historicism with dominant global models such as the NPM eliminating all rivals and remaining triumphant in perpetuity. There are also brakes on universalization. Models close to universalism face inevitable challenges as a consequence of reactions to the anti-innovative conformism that is often engendered by triumphant models and orthodoxies. Global standards can fail because over time they do not meet local and changing circumstances. The almost universal gold standard for regulating currencies in the financial world for over 50 years from the late nineteenth century eventually was abandoned as it lacked the flexibility to respond to the growing need for innovation and local autonomy in the management of national economies (Eichengreen 2008). As Grewal (2008:5) notes: ‘inherent in the use of any standard is a tension between the cooperation that it allows users to enjoy and the check on innovation that it also imposes, since innovation would constitute a break in an ongoing cooperative regime’.

We should note too that not all standards share the same characteristics. The key conditions that appear to strengthen a model’s network power are a) its incompatibility with competitor standards, thus requiring individuals to adopt a single standard if they wish to gain access to a dominant network; b) a high level of availability indicating the ease with which a network accepts new entrants willing to accept its standards (unlike membership standards which tend to be more exclusive); and reasonable but not too much malleability, indicating the extent to which a standard underlying a network is open to piecemeal revision without disrupting the key principles and ongoing social relationships that they support. Empirically we should be able to test such propositions.

Nor do dominant models exist in a vacuum. They have consequences for other policy objectives (and other dominant models in the global knowledge economy) and these may be perverse. NPM and associated commercialization approaches to research, for example, despite facilitating some forms of entrepreneurialism, may encourage short-termism and limit the scope for the scientific curiosity and creativity in basic research that are essential for high-quality innovation (OECD 2008). Moreover, as social constructions, all models are subject to the contestations of values that are part of the everyday world of sociability and frequently lead to the regular and cyclical supplanting of temporarily dominant models by alternatives (Hood 1998). Yet, network power in the age of policy internationalization provides some models, such as the NPM, with the durability to rise above this (normal) cyclicality for far longer than in less globally-networked eras.
Conclusion

Increasingly it appears advantageous for higher education research to explore the differences and contestations that underlie network power in the globalization of models and standards. Actors generate structures in dynamic processes of structuration that, in turn, constrain levels of autonomy. There is a constant spatial reorganization of higher education policymaking through an inextricable co-influencing of the global and the local. The era of policy internationalization, perceived through agents, structures and networks in processes of mutual constructions, begins to challenge over-simple binary distinctions between policy convergence and divergence and recognizes their symbiotic relationship in the diffusion of global standards. But, even more importantly, notions of structuration and network power help to remedy a longstanding under-theorization of structure in analyses of higher education governance, an especially important requirement in the age of globalization and policy internationalization.

Bibliography


