The Bologna Process Goes Global: A Model, Market, Mobility, Brain Power or State Building Strategy?

[Invitational paper to ANPED's Annual Conference, October 2008, Brazil]

Susan L. Robertson,  
Centre for Globalisation, Education and Societies  
University of Bristol

1. Introduction

In many parts of the world, higher education is viewed as an engine for the development of a knowledge-based economy with higher education policies, programmes and practices increasingly co-opted and shaped by wider geo-strategic political and economic interests. Research studies and policy analyses, however, still tend to deny the global interconnectedness of these policy developments, viewing higher education in nationally or regionally-specific terms, or using simple typologies which reduce higher education systems to, for instance, ‘exporting’ or ‘importing’ nations (see OECD, 2004). These approaches limit our understanding of the close and complex articulations and interactions between higher education sectors, economic policies, and regional interests that are generated by multi-scalar competitive strategies and global influences on higher education.

With this in mind, this paper examines the progressive interlinking of higher education policy spaces around the globe with a particular focus on Europe and its globalising higher education project, and the implications of this for other national and regional economies. The paper begins with the European Higher Education Area, outlining the key features of the competitive European project in higher education. I trace how the multilateral Bologna Process, to create a unified higher education architecture in Europe, has been re-shaped and re-directed by the EU’s Lisbon 2000 strategy for competitiveness and the re-launched Lisbon 2005 agenda. I argue, firstly, that the revamped Lisbon strategy has confirmed a neo-liberal language of economic competitiveness in higher education policies at the European level. Secondly, I demonstrate how this agenda has allowed higher education to be co-opted as a platform for the European Union's wider regionalising and globalising strategies. This section of the paper shows how higher education has become strategically important for the European Union in creating both 'minds' and 'markets' for the European knowledge-economy. Next, I explore how the growing range of educational initiatives at the European-level has affected – both directly and indirectly – wider national higher education spaces, including countries and regions, such as the USA, Australia, Latin America, South East Asia, and so on. The regionalising process in higher education that is promoted by European-level actors has caused considerable consternation in countries, such as the USA and Australia, where both have traditionally had the lion’s share of the higher education export industry. Their actions

---

1 I would like to thank the ANPED organisers for their generous invitation to present this paper, and my colleague Professor Alfredo Gomes, Federal University of Pernambuco, Recife, for not only facilitating this, but for his generous engagements with this project.
and reactions, therefore, are complex, and shaped by endogenous as well as exogenous interests (Quintin 2006; Ferrero-Waldner 2005).

In the final section, I examine how internal pressures have coincided with these external influences and relations to create a critical 'tipping point' in global understandings of international relations in higher education. The European higher education project, which is increasingly perceived as having some significance to the global economy, has set off a series of dynamic reactions in countries such as Australia and the United States, which is leading to multiple new logics and new imaginaries about the global higher education landscape. Through this, a more integrated and relational global system of higher education is emerging. I also reflect upon why Europe has tended to prioritise regions as a means for advancing its geo-strategic interests, suggesting that new regional relations provide a platform for Europe to act in state-like ways.

2. ‘Knowledge’, ‘Economy’, ‘Europe’: Early Beginnings

The creation of a coherent and competitive Europe had its antecedents in the 1950s, and higher education initiatives played an important role from the beginning (Corbett 2005; Hingel 2001). However, from the 1950s until the early 1990s, the EU’s higher education project was almost entirely internally-oriented in its ontology and outcomes. With the notable exception of the United Kingdom (and to a lesser extent France and Germany), the ‘internationalisation’ of study programmes, curricula, student mobility, and research career paths were primarily oriented towards European partners and Europeanizing processes. Key markers during this period were the institutionalizing of regular meetings between the European education ministers, the eventual creation of the European University Institute in Florence in 1971, and the establishment of the EU’s Erasmus mobility programme in 1987 which facilitated the movement of students and staff between universities of the Member States.

The main policy aims embedded in these European-level initiatives were to produce European-minded citizens, engaged with the expanding Community (and European Commission), and committed to the concept of ‘European’ culture and values. Delors however also “…had a highly developed idea of education and the part it could play in his strategy for advancing European integration via the single market” (Corbett 2005: 121). Thus, two concerns came together, which it seemed higher education programmes could mediate; how to create a European Single Market, on the one hand, and a European citizen, on the other. Harnessing commitment to the European project was viewed as essential in order to combat ‘narrow nationalism’; an impediment to the advance of Europe as a political project.

In 1992, a single market and European Union were announced by the Treaty of European Union and signed at Maastricht by the Heads of the European Community's Member States. The Maastricht Treaty acknowledged the European Union's direct role in education, whilst attempting to circumscribe tightly the European Commission's room for maneuver by restricting European-level action to ‘supplementary’ activities. Whilst the Maastricht Treaty appeared to suggest that the EU's role would be modest, under Delors the European Commission had ambitions to develop a more comprehensive policy for higher education at the European scale.

The 1991 Memorandum on Higher Education shows that higher education “…had
already become part of the Community’s broader agenda of economic and social coherence” (Huisman and van der Wende 2004: 350). The Commission quickly made an internal assessment of the EU’s programmes and developed a new strategy to exploit the opportunities opened by up the Maastricht Treaty's acknowledgement of the 'European dimension' in education. The Commission also began to look outward, beyond the region. It established higher education collaborative programmes with non-EU countries through initiatives such as: the ALFA programme in Latin America; the development of the Tempus cooperation programme with countries – Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and neighbouring Mediterranean countries; and Asia-Europe relations through Asia-Europe inter-regional structures, such as Asia-Link (Robertson, 2008b). However at this point these programmes tended to be based on cultural cooperation and exchange objectives, and were not well-coordinated with the emerging policy programme for education within Europe.

To make sense of the politics behind the Memorandum and the events that followed, it is crucial we consider the changing nature of the wider economic and geopolitical context that Europe’s Member States found themselves in. In 1991-92 the biggest economies (including Germany) experienced a recession which increased the number of unemployed graduates in Europe (Teichler and Kehm, 1995). This provided some legitimacy for the EC's higher education project. However, of greater significance were the wider changes taking place in the global economy as a result of economic globalization, the transnationalisation of production and finance at the material level, and the shift from Keynesianism toward neo-liberalism at the ideological level. These structural changes in the global economy had direct implications for the EU in that they directly affected the restructuring of the EU. To be competitive in the global economy, Europe had to transform itself along free trade and free market lines. As Bieler and Morton argue, “…the deregulation of the national financial markets was institutionalized in the Internal Market Programme…while the shift toward neo-liberalism was expressed by the very nature of the Internal Market programme and its drive for liberalization and the neo-liberal convergence criteria of EMU [sic: European Monetary Union] focusing on low inflation and price stability” (Bieler and Morton, 2001: 5).

The imperative to advance Europe as a political and economic project more generally, and a knowledge-based economy more specifically, is linked to the USA and Europe’s declining share of good’s production globally. For this reason, both the USA and the EU share a common interest in expanding the global services economy – including the higher education as a market, as an engine for innovation, and a key sector in developing new forms of intellectual property. And as Hartmann (2008: 210-11) notes, whilst the USA dominates world trade in commercial services - with 14.3% of the world’s share (WTO, 2007: 12), the combined share of European Member States (now 27) generates around 46%. This share has increased the aspiration and capability of the EU to also set standards in the emerging global service economy, giving further impetus to the struggle between Europe and the US in providing normative leadership over the development of a service-based economy.

3. **New/Lisbon and an Expansive Bologna: Visions and Mechanisms**

In 2000, the European Union's educational activities were given a significant boost by the ‘Lisbon Strategy’: part of the EU’s wider economic platform, which famously declared: "…the European Union must become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-
based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion" (European Council 2000). The Lisbon Strategy provided a mandate and agenda for extending the reach of Europe’s policy responsibility deeper into national territory – education - and ultimately outwards to the rest of the world. The Lisbon Strategy confirmed a neo-liberal understanding of higher education's contribution to the socio-economic well-being of the region; building and securing human capital. In January 2000, upon the proposal of the European Commission, a decision was taken to establish a European Research and Innovation Area (ERIA), with the principal, explicit, objective of supporting a knowledge-based economy on a European scale under the framing of a "Europe of Knowledge".

The Lisbon 2000 agenda for higher education was paralleled by the Bologna Process; a distinctive and ambitious project driven by national governments and other key stakeholders to create a common architecture and a European area for higher education. The Bologna Process had its roots in a strategic articulation between domestic and regional agendas. Following a meeting in 1998 in Paris to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne, French Minister for Education, Claude Allegre secured the agreement of the German, Italian and the United Kingdom Education Ministers; to commit their countries to a new architecture for higher education (Ravinet, 2008). This architecture would build upon the Convention for the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications in the European region (Lisbon Convention) which had been signed in 1997. Allegre argued that in order to develop a knowledge-based economy, Europe needed to both emulate the US system and also stem the flow of European graduates to the US.

The following year the Bologna Declaration (1999) committed 29 signatory countries to six “action lines” directed towards establishing a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to be realized by 2010. Within this 'Area', staff and student mobility was to be enhanced by the alignment of national quality assurance, a compatible degree structure was to be developed based on a 3+2+3 model (Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate), the adoption of a credit transfer system, and a common way of describing qualifications to be outlined in a personal ‘diploma supplement’. Taken together, these regulatory mechanisms were viewed as enabling Bologna to act as vehicle for raising the attractiveness of Europe as an education market worldwide (Zgaga, 2006: 10).

The Bologna Process is a voluntary international agreement, situated outside the European Union's governance framework, although it is largely driven by EU interests and promotes many initiatives (such as the ECTS credit system) originally piloted by the European Commission (Keeling 2006). "Convinced that the establishment of the European area of higher education required constant support, supervision and adaptation to the continuously evolving needs" (Bologna Declaration 1999), the European education ministers decided to meet regularly to assess progress, transforming the Bologna commitment into an ongoing policy process. The Bologna Follow-Up Group has responsibility for advancing this ongoing policy agenda.

Membership of the Bologna Process and the associated European Higher Education Area has since increased to now include, by 2009, 46 countries containing around 5,600 public and private institutions with more than 16 million students. The European Higher Education Area includes Russia and southeast Europe; it thus extends far beyond the European Union as a constitutional entity.

Determining the basis of membership of Bologna, however, has been an important geo-
strategic project. As Hartmann (2008) points out, initially membership of Bologna was based broadly on who were signatories to the Lisbon Convention (1997). For historical reasons this included the United States, Canada and Australia, via UNESCO’s definition of Europe (US and Canada signed in 1975, Australia in 1986) (Hartmann, 2008: 213). This meant these countries, most importantly the US, had had a say in the drafting of the initial Bologna Process. Mindful that membership had to be more than Europe and the accession countries (in that it needed to include Russia but not its competitor—the US), some skilful political manoeuvring was required. The Lisbon Convention, as the basis for formal membership of the Bologna Process was jettisoned in 2003 in favour of the Council of Europe’s European Cultural Convention, thereby excluding the US, Canada and Australia. Hartmann (2008: 214) argues that this was one of a series of moves by Europe to challenge the imperial role of the US in standard setting, turning it simultaneously into both a rival as well as a model.

4. The ‘Extra-Regional’ in Europe’s Higher Education Project

If higher education thus far had been oriented toward managing the territorial project and its politics within the expanding region as a result of accessions, from around 2003 onward, the various political apparatuses of Europe, in particular the EC, began to pursue a more explicit ‘extra-regional’ globalising strategy which has had both direct and indirect effects (Robertson, 2009a). The direct effects were the outcomes, both within and outside of Europe, of the explicit strategies to realize a competitive European higher education area and market; such as the Erasmus Mundus programme, the Neighbourhood Policy, the GATS negotiations, mobilization of old colonial links to align with Europe’s market interests, and so on. The indirect effects were the consequence of the reactions to this strategy in key domestic economies in the global economy, where Bologna was now viewed as a potential threat (USA, Australia), a model for domestic restructuring (Brazil, China), or the basis for new regional projects around the globe (Africa, Latin America).

The pre-text for this change in strategy can be traced to around 2003, and the increased awareness within the European Commission of declining growth in the services sector in Europe. This awareness is encapsulated in Viviane Reding, Member of the EC responsible for Education and Culture, statement, where she outlined the basis for ‘Making the EU a prominent figure in the World Education Market’. Reding argued that “…national governments alone cannot meet the challenges of globalization, new technologies and the single market” (p. 2). For the European Commission, this meant bringing the private sector into its various activities, advancing European-level leadership, and continuing to promote the liberalization of education services through the World Trade Organization’s (WTO’s) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS).

A suite of higher education initiatives were now launched by the Commission, all characterized by strong emphasis on global competitiveness. These were given force, focus and legitimacy following the Mid-Term Review of the Lisbon strategy chaired by Wim Kok (European Commission, 2005a). Kok (2004) argued that the Lisbon 2010 strategy had failed to deliver satisfactory economic performance, and that Europe was far from achieving the socio-economic improvements that the Lisbon strategy had promised. Kok announced that Europe was falling rapidly behind both the USA and Asia. The spectre of China and India, as both threat and opportunity (Kok 2004: 12), was
now added as a critical new dimension to Europe's external challenges. For Europe to compete, Kok argued, Europe needed to “…develop its own area of specialisms, excellence and comparative advantage which inevitably must lie in a commitment to the knowledge economy in its widest sense” (Kok 2004: 12).

The Presidency Conclusions of the European Council in turn acknowledged the mixed results of Lisbon, and called for urgent actions, endorsing the Commission’s proposed ‘new’ Lisbon Strategy (European Council 2005a: 3) which redirected attention almost entirely to ‘jobs and growth’. The Lisbon 'Mid-Term' Review enabled the European Commission to play up and play upon the discourse of crisis to lever in a range of new initiatives that not only called for reform of the higher education sector (European Commission, 2006), but directed policy attention almost entirely towards investment, innovation and jobs (European Commission, 2005a: 4; Collignon 2006) (see Figure 1).

The ‘new Lisbon’ strategy – by promoting ‘less, of the same’ (Collignon 2006) – firmly embraced a neo-liberal vision of how the European knowledge-economy could be enhanced, and where higher education was represented as critical. The European Commission (2005b; 2006) saw universities' role in the production of a European knowledge-economy as derived from and dependent on their relationship to industry (hence the heightened concern with “knowledge transfer”). Universities’ operations, governance and incentive structures, and not just their educational and research outputs, became a matter of European-level policy concern.

One week after the March 2005 meeting of European Council, Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso, delivered a stirring speech to the higher education sector at the European University Association convention in Glasgow, entitled 'Strong Universities for Europe' (Barroso, 2005) where he argued that the state of education in Europe compared to other world regions was nothing short of “miserable” (p.25). In a new departure, the Commission began to give direct recommendations about how universities' structures of governance, financing and research management (including performance measurements and incentives) should be ‘modernized’ to enable Europe to
compete in the global competition for minds and markets (European Commission, 2005b; 2006). This included bringing in so called ‘Third Countries’ into cooperation agreements, to stem their flow to the US. Education thus became an important area of ‘sectoral dialogue’ with a number of Asian countries, including China. The ‘Erasmus Mundus’ global exchange programme, launched in 2003 with a budget of EUR 230 million for its first four years, included supplementary funding to increase participation by international students from specific Asian countries including India and China (the so-called "Asian Windows"). Erasmus Mundus was intended to encourage talented students to study and remain in Europe following their studies to contribute to Europe’s competitive economy. By 2008 Erasmus Mundus will be supporting more than 100 Erasmus Mundus master’s courses.

The EU’s global talent strategy also sought to attract leading European researchers back to Europe by refining the “Marie Curie” policy and programme instruments. In the EU’s 2007-13 Framework 7 programme of research funding, the international dimension was strengthened, with funds targeted at the ‘return and reintegration’ of leading researchers who had been working abroad. Furthermore, students who had been studying in Europe for at least four of the prior five years became eligible to apply for fellowship funds from Marie Curie to continue research in European universities. The Commission, against much initial resistance, also developed a proposal for a “European Institute of Technology”, to “act as a pole of attraction for the very best minds, ideas and companies from around the world” (European Commission 2005b). A diminished version of the original was launched in 2008 (Jones, 2008). Higher education, thus, becoming deeply incorporated into the European Union’s drive to improve its economic position and influence in the world.

Crucial to this process was the remarkable unfolding though uneven embedding of the Bologna Process and its various instruments; the Tuning Programme (2003-) to translate existing disciplines of study into competencies, and the establishment of a European Qualifications Register (2008-) to ensure the quality assurance of higher education providers, is co-constitutive of new objects and subjects of governance. Their combination has also caused considerable discussion in key economies around the world over the implications of this political regulatory project for their own domestic interests and longer-term strategies. This discussion is likely to be fueled by the recent call for tenders by the European Commission to develop a ranking system that could be applied globally (Robertson, 2009b). The intention is to challenge the dominance of the Shanghai Jiao Tong and the Times Higher ranking systems in relation to European interests, largely as it is argued especially by the continental Member States (especially France) such ranking systems suit, and consolidate, US interests.

In sum, it is clear that the techniques of regional governance, however, have their potency not only in terms of internal regulation, but have increasingly been viewed as having the potential to challenge the basis of normative leadership in the education services sector. This has been given considerable impetus by the direct and indirect effects of Europe’s higher education project on other domestic economies and nascent regional ambitions within the near region, and beyond.

In an EC Communique in 2006, the Commission argued “Ministers see the European Higher Education Area as a partner of higher education systems in other regions of the world….” and noted that… “The role and visibility of higher education in EU external relations is increasingly toward: neighbouring countries where programmes like Tempus
have been charged with an explicit Bologna mandate (European Neighbourhood Policy); industrialised nations (OECD/G8); and with developing countries (Alban, Asia Link etc” (p. 7). The BFUG was also given the mandate to elaborate upon, and agree on, a strategy for the external dimension in order to strengthen the attractiveness of the EHEA. (BFUG Work Programme, 2005-2007; Zgaga, 2006). This strategy, to be with other regions rather than countries (BFUG, 2005; [emphasis added]), was tabled at the London 2007 Ministerial meeting. This means developing regions of priority interest for Europe. The task ahead is to create the conditions for international mobility (mode 4 of the GATS agreement), recognition structures, cooperation and attractiveness.

However, many of the European researchers the European Union was attempting to lure back were based in the United States; well-established as a premier international destination for foreign students and researchers. The United States is also home to many of the world’s leading universities, dominating the global rankings since the 1950s (Graham and Diamond 1997; THES 2008; Shanghai Jiao Tong 2008). According to most commentators, “a performance gradient” continues to separate US research universities from the rest (Herbst 2004). Nonetheless, analyses in the US reveal that other countries were rapidly catching up on a number of fronts (OECD 2006; THES 2006; Spellings Commission 2006), and that “there are alarming indicators of stagnation and actual decline” (Douglass 2006) in the US higher education sector.

In some arenas in the United States, there is keen interest in the developments in Europe. Admiration is also expressed for the rapidity of the European changes and the strength of the political-will back-grounding them (Jaschik 2006). The American Association of International Educators (NAFSA) has also set up a Taskforce on the Bologna Process, and there is increasing interest at the institutional level about the new Bologna credentials and templates. However, to date the effect of the Bologna reforms on the US have been to leverage debate around a crisis in US higher education and the need to review marketing, visa, and admissions processes to stem the decline in share of the higher education export market (Robertson and Keeling, 2008).

This contrasts sharply with the Australian perspective, which views winning market dominance more clearly as a numbers game. In April 2006, Julie Bishop, the then Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training, tabled a paper entitled "The Bologna Process and Australia: Next Steps". This official response to the Bologna Process claimed that Australia must ensure compatibility to Bologna or face the risks associated with being "a Bologna outsider" (Bishop 2006). Viewed in this way, the European higher education developments represent a major threat for a number of reasons. There is a steady flow of students from Europe; being Bologna-compatible enables and enhances these movements, as students would exit an Australian university with a qualification that is acceptable in the European labour market. Second, the Australian government is well aware that the European Commission has used a number of instruments to create linkages and partnerships in the Asian and Latin American regions (Robertson, 2009) in order to advance EU economic interests. If Europe were to become a desirable destination for Asian students because of its competitive fee structure, status of universities, and the increasing tendency to teach in English at the graduate level, then Europe might also threaten Australia’s dominance in the market.

In relation to the Asian region - the region of most strategic concern to Australia -the European Commission has used the Erasmus Mundus ‘Asian Windows’ programme to recruit Indian and Chinese students to study for Masters’ degrees in European
universities. The Bologna Process has also been the main topic of conversation at a number of Asia-Europe meetings since 2005. Added to this, some Asian countries have been monitoring the Bologna Process closely, while China has sought observer status at the 2007 EU Ministerial meeting for Bologna. In April 2007, Australia signed a joint declaration with the EU to become Bologna-compatible and strengthen cooperation to cover issues of quality assurance, benchmarking and indicators, and qualifications frameworks (Figel and Bishop, 2007). There programmes are seen by the Australian federal government as being critical to developing the new ‘globally aware’ Australian worker and citizen.

The Bologna Process and the creation of a European Higher Education Area has clearly inspired more strategic ways of thinking about regions and the value of creating and institutionalizing the role of education in regional relationships. While education has been on the agenda in forums like APEC (Dale and Robertson, 2002), Bologna offers a different kind of imaginary, creating a regional higher education architecture which offers the possibility for a single market for higher education services and the potential to improve future employability. These developments suggest that the domestic economies, such as Australia and the US, are involved in a complex set of strategic positionings in order to manage the threat (and opportunities) posed by the rapid growth of the European Higher Education Area and the Bologna Process. The entry of the EU into this sphere has clearly ‘tipped’ the balance of the terrain in a very different direction. It is likely not possible to ignore these pressures - given the multiple ways the EU has been engaged in inter-regional projects in both the Asian and Latin American regions (Robertson, 2006, 2008, 2009; Robertson and Keeling, 2008; Zgaga, 2007), and the long shadow cast by China. At the same time, economies such as Brazil are using the Bologna architecture as a model for the rationalization of access and to generate new system efficiencies. These developments clearly offer Brazilian graduates an efficient articulation with European graduate studies and labour markets into the future, providing a viable alternative to the US as a destination for study and work.

4. 'Capabilities' and 'Tipping Points' in Global Higher Education

This analysis shows that we are dealing with a highly complex and interlinked set of processes and relations. In all of these geopolitical spaces, higher education has become regarded as a critical ‘motor’ for national and regional competitiveness in the global economy, and a global battle has begun for the minds and markets to support this. It is evident that these national and regional higher education sectors have become more closely woven into the global system, though, as we have shown, the precise nature and consequence of that relationship varies as a result of their different histories, size and shape of their economies, geo-political interests, internal political arrangements, the specific nature of the higher education sector, the kinds of development strategies that are deployed, and so on.

I have explored the territorialising strategies of the European Union in higher education, looking at how the EU has firstly co-opted higher education as part of its regional project, and then exported the Bologna reforms to extend its ‘spheres of influence’ to other parts of the world. The EU’s successful educational programmes initially provided a rich pool of experience, relationships, resources and discussions for new policies to draw on. The re-launched Lisbon competitiveness agenda gave these ‘low-register’ developments political traction, providing the mandate and the political philosophy for
further progress, while the Bologna Process provided a range of useful tools. The EU is now pursuing two complementary internationalising strategies: firstly, attempting to make its model of higher education dominant in order to increase its overall market share of international higher education, and secondly, trying to harness more of the world’s best minds to motor the European economy. Both of these objectives collide directly with the established interests in countries such as Australia and the United States in higher education.

The USA continues to dominate the international student market, with its primary interest being to attract, develop and retain talent for its research and other economic activities. The employment of the world’s best ‘minds’ to produce innovation and generate value for the US economy is central to the USA’s knowledge-economy strategy. However, the US administration is also mindful of the way in which higher education—conceived of in ambassadorial terms and as a civilising force—can be deployed to mediate the foreign policy credibility gap that has opened up through its homeland security policies and the ‘war on terror’. The rapid realisation of the European Higher Education Area has provided a useful lever for this domestic debate.

On the other hand, since the 1990s, Australia has vigorously pursued a policy of constructing the higher education sector as a market and exporting education globally. It has managed to secure a competitive position in this market at a time when many Asian countries were seeking to invest in higher education but had limited capacity to provide it themselves. Australia was therefore able to use its regional location to advantage. Australia became a major supplier of education services within the region and its higher education institutions have became highly dependant on the revenue streams that this generated. For both the USA and Australia, there is much at stake for their (knowledge)-economies.

The question to be asked, however, is: why now? Given that both Bologna and the Lisbon Agenda have been on the table since the beginning of the decade, why have Australia and the USA responded in their different ways at this particular juncture? We believe that there are a number of interconnected reasons for this. The combination of the re-launched Lisbon 2005 agenda, the deployment of globally-oriented strategies that challenge the regional interests of the USA and Australia, together with the European Higher Education Area’s astonishing achievements and size, represents a new material ‘capability’ and that, when added to endogenous dynamics in both the USA and Australia, a critical ‘tipping point’ has been reached, which is leading to a tighter integration of the global knowledge-economy.

We adopt here Saskia Sassen’s (2006) definitions of ‘capability’ and ‘tipping point’; to talk about how path-shaping changes occur and how new articulations of the higher education environment take shape. For Sassen, ‘capability’ and ‘tipping points’ are two key elements that enable us to examine foundational transformations in complex systems over time.

‘Capabilities’ are defined by Sassen as:

…collective productions whose development entails time, making, competition, and conflicts, and whose utilities are, in principle, multivalent because they are conditioned in the character of the relational systems within which they
function. That is to say, a given capability can contribute to the formation of a very different relational system from the one that it originates in (p. 7-8).

There are several points to note here: Firstly, that capabilities are produced through discursive and material processes, as we see with, for example, the production of ‘Europe’, the production of the European Higher Education area, the production of a competitive US, and so on. They are, then, political projects. Secondly, the production of capabilities involves actors or institutions struggling over ideas, resources, embedding power in institutions and so on. These are dynamic, contingent and incomplete processes. As a result they are fluid. Thirdly, that power is relational; a capability has to be seen by others -as in our case the USA or Australia- as having some force or possible set of outcomes - even if that capability is amplified in others’ imaginations and used for purposes that were not intended, such as endogenous changes. Its power derives from the fact that it can have effects on other systems. Fourthly, capabilities can include technological, organisational, and natural resources and, as such, they are concentrations of material and discursive power (Cox, 1996: 98). Finally, a given capability, can contribute to the formation of a very different relational system to the one that it originated in. Sassen argues that the Bretton Woods institutions—IMF, World Bank, later the WTO—came to have a particular kind of global capability from the 1970s onward with the collapse of the post-war settlement and the denationalising of states. Similarly, we might argue that the EU regionalising project is now contributing to the formation of a very different relational system—one that is both more global and also transforming national logics in other parts of the world.

The collective production of a more outward-looking, globally-competitive ‘Europe’ by European elites has considerably more material force than an insider perspective might grant it. Much of the capability of the European project is derived from its external appearance of coherence (or at least the coherence attributed to it by external commentators). Thus, the capability of the European Union is to some extent illusionary. It is still an open question as to whether the European Union will be able to direct policy and funding sufficiently to enable it to become a competing brand and a substantial threat to the other regions. An international 'student perceptions' survey (ACA 2005) shows that the European 'branding' of higher education had not been entirely successful. While Erasmus Mundus might make some inroads into this, and the Marie Curie instruments might act as a sufficient lure to bring leading academics back to Europe, the disjunctions between the newly re-imagined European knowledge-economy and the real multifaceted and multi-scalar economy of Europe will necessarily limit the impact and steering of Europe’s higher education/knowledge economy strategy (see Robertson, 2007, 2008). There are considerable gaps - of capacity, capability and legitimacy - which hinder the EU’s ability to have global impact through their higher education policy initiatives.

The dilemma for countries like Australia is what to do about the new European capability; to stay outside of the Bologna model, or locate itself within? The USA has been able to use the threat of the EU’s capability and the position of US in the global economy to legitimate a crisis discourse about "accountability" and "transparency" to push forward an agenda for change within universities. The EU has also used a discourse of crisis from 2004 onward to enhance its capability; by setting in train a range of initiatives intended to directly reshape the mandate and governance of higher education in Europe—including the identification and resourcing of an elite set of higher education
institutions across Europe (for example, the EIT project and the European Research Council).

This brings in a second critical element for understanding the global changes; the idea of a ‘tipping points’. Sassen (2006: 7) refers to ‘tipping points’ as:

…identifying the dynamics involved in capability switching relational systems and/or organising logics. That is to say, this type of analysis can accommodate the fact of tipping, or the ‘event’…rather than being confined to an outcome (p. 9).

To identify the ‘tipping point’, we need to look closely at the dynamics, the mechanisms, the act, the event; the processes, that are involved in shifting the register of effect so that there is no easy turning back and a new logic is set in train.² It is where in certain circumstances quantitative elements are transformed into qualitative change. A focus on tipping points would identify the dynamics involved that shifted or switched the post war logic to another. Second, tipping points are clearly related to capability—but capability is not sufficient on its own, as we can see with Europe.

So how is this concept useful for my analysis? We might argue that the tipping point toward a more integrated assemblage of global higher education is made up of the following dynamics: an expanded Europe as a result of new accession countries joining; the insertion of a more assertive neo-liberal agenda in Europe following the Mid-Term Review of Lisbon; a single architecture for European higher education structured as a tiered system for global competitiveness; Europe’s globalising interests in search of global talent including the return to Europe of researchers; the enmeshment of exporting economies like Australia in multiple world regions, including Europe; the emergence of China and India as potential markets and powers, and the strategic interests of all players in having a stake in Europe; endogenous politics in the USA where Europe’s knowledge economy is amplified for its “shock value” which in turn gives Europe capability; the undiminished dependence of the USA on the steady flow of graduates from Europe as well as other parts of the world. The meeting of the European education ministers in London May 2007 bound these factors together into a critical “policy moment”, when the viewpoints of stakeholders and observers were formally articulated, positions taken, and policy responses formulated. By March 2009 the Bologna model was being viewed as firmly global, with invitations to countries around the world (beyond the formal Bologna signatories) being invited to participate in important meetings.

The tighter a nation is linked into the global economy, the more it will feel pressured to ‘jump track’ into the new logic which is being produced. However, these switches are not automatic; they are the result of competition and conflict. In the case of Australia, its higher education sector is so deeply enmeshed in the regional and global economy that it is now faced with the momentus strategic reality of switching its internal logic—its relatively more flexible architecture of higher education—to accommodate an emerging reality; of the new competitive Europe. Not only are the higher education sectors in these regions becoming more integrated, but we can also see a more highly-stratified global market of higher education emerging across these regional spaces. A global “Ivy League”, or “super-league” (Markwell 2006) of universities is identifiable, who already

² An example we might use to illustrate this point more generally is what Jessop (1999) has argued is the shift from the Keynesian Welfare National State that characterised the post World War II settlement to the Schumpeterian Post National Regime from the 1990s.
operate on an international and competitive plane, and who are holding themselves aloof from suggestions of new models or markets radically reshaping their operations, objectives and outlooks. As Graham and Diamond (1997) have noted in the US context, the top of this hierarchy can be remarkably stable. While there have always been systems of higher education with elite institutions and intense status competition (Marginson 2006, 2007), what is different today, and why it matters more, is the centrality of such highly-stratified systems to the new global economy. Those institutions that wish to stand outside of the tipping logic are pro-actively mobilising their own resources and capabilities in order to generate an alternative circuit with its own ‘elite’/competitive advantage. They are rejecting the compatibility logic, defining their own global pathways, and extending their scalar reach.

One final important question remains, as to why the BFUG, the European Commission, together with other key European-level actors such as the EUA, all committed to the development of Europe as a political project, have sought to prioritise regions rather than countries as a means of promoting what Zgaga refers to as ‘the echo’ of Bologna globally (2006: 16). At one level we might read the focus on other regions as a political move, able to invoke a particular kind of legitimacy arising from being a signatory to the Lisbon Convention (1997). In the words of the Convention, approaching other Regions of the world will contribute to Europe’s capacity to “…promot[e] peace, mutual understanding, and tolerance” (Zgaga, 2006: 19). However, we might also read the prioritizing of regional partnerships as strategic; the consequence of struggles “…over the increasingly variable geometries of governance within and beyond the borders of the European Union” (Jessop, 2005: 225). Regional partnerships draw upon the capabilities of old colonial linkages, their elite diaspora and intellectual networks (for instance Francophone Africa; Lusophone Africa; Latin America). They are also useful mechanisms for activating and constituting new forms of regional re/organization which draw in, and scaffold into existence, European normative frameworks (instruments of European higher education restructuring) and normative power, rather than its alternative; US norm making capability (Hartmann, 2008).

However, I would also argue that negotiating through regions also means being able to jump scales (Jessop, 2005: 226), by-passing existing scalar fixes such as those of the nation-state and its Westphalian claim to territory and sovereignty, seeking instead to advance and institutionalize its interests through these new alliances. As this paper has argued, the scalar redistribution of the labour of the state and education is an important aspect of economic and political restructuring (Collinge, 1999). Viewed in this way, interregionalisms offer a platform for, and possibility of, a nascent region—in this case Europe—to act in a state-like way, advancing its claim to dominance in an interregional arena that itself operates as a strategically selective terrain, given the characteristics, capabilities and activities of the organizations located on this regional scale.

5. Concluding Remarks

An overriding concern of this paper has been to demonstrate the nature and consequences of this multi-scalar, multi-centric relation within and across spaces—to move our analytical focus away from bi-lateral causal explanations, or from the more recent attention on positioning and position-taking. These explanations offer useful insights, however they do not give us sufficient analytical purchase on the transformations that are taking place within and across state spaces that in turn change
the logics and dynamics shaping developmental trajectories. In other words, I am looking at the ‘not-so-obvious’ as well as the more obvious outcomes of globalisation; the processes of de-nationalising within the national domain, as well as the more visible global rescaling that is taking place. I have examined how internal logics of competitiveness at the regional level are beginning to transform the global playing field. While it is early days, it is nonetheless possible to see a set of dynamics at play, where new capabilities are emerging to disrupt – and reconfigure - the balance of power. A whole new “ball game” is emerging, in which power and influence in this more integrated, stratified global system, are being radically reshaped, and not simply reallocated.

There are new elements in this mix that I have not addressed in this paper, though they are clearly important; the rise of China and the significance of its own higher education reforms, the commitment of Singapore to become a regional provider of education services, the creation of higher education ‘hubs’ in the Arab region, the Alternative Area of the Americas, the ambivalent and ambiguous position of the United Kingdom in the Bologna negotiations, and so on. Nor have I paid sufficient attention to the hedge-betting strategies of many of higher education institutions and their networks of influence, at various levels of the global hierarchy, in reaction to the limitations that a Bologna-like architecture might impose on their institutions. Further analysis of these factors would be richly rewarding. Separately and collectively, such developments - together with those that we have outlined above- are transforming global, regional and national spaces, the interrelations between them, and the role and significance of universities within them.

References


