Conceptualizing Harmonization of Higher Education Systems:
The Application of Regional Integration Theories on Higher Education Studies

Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis[1]

[1] Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth, Germany

Correspondence: Emnet Tadesse Woldegiorgis, Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS), University of Bayreuth, Germany. Tel: 491-791-609-057. E-mail: emnetadesse@yahoo.com

Abstract

There have been various higher education policy reforms at regional level to overcome the challenges and impacts of globalization in the current knowledge based global economy. Universities have already been involved in various internationalization processes establishing both bilateral and multilateral cooperations across borders. Through various integration schemes, regional organizations like the European Union (EU) and its Commission, the African Union (AU) and its Commission are engaging in policy harmonization processes to foster more integration and provide regional remedies for the common challenges of globalization in their respective regions. Researchers also engaged in academic debates and analyze various higher education system integration discourses at professional level. Most of the theories used in higher education discourses however are borrowed from other disciplines and when terms and concepts from other disciplines migrate to the higher education sector and vice versa there is fertile ground for confusion and misunderstanding unless they are conceptually framed and analyzed. This particular article focuses on theories of regional integration and higher education harmonization discourses. It discusses the process of policy harmonization in higher education and interprets the notions of regional integration theories in the interpretive paradigms of informal/formal, top-down/bottom-up, proactive/reactive, gradual/ quantum leap and internally driven/ externally driven relationships in policy formulations. These interpretive paradigms provide a theoretical perspective on conceptual framework of higher education harmonization and integration schemes form the neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist point of view.

Keywords: higher education, regional integration, harmonization, neo-functionalism, intergovernmentalist

1. Introduction

Higher education study is a multi-disciplinary subject which borrows concepts and theories from various disciplines including political science, economics, sociology, management and leadership. Explaining state society relationships in higher education, regional integration and policy harmonization, the division of sovereignty between nation-states and supranational institutions, we hardly can escape theories of Political Science. The issue of higher education finance, knowledge economy, the public and private goods discourse of higher education and issues of privatization logically take theories and concepts from economics. If we talk about academic culture and ideology, academic oligarchy, the notion of academic 'elite', and the discourse of access in terms of gender, race and class then conceptualizing them from sociological point of view may not be inevitable. In the same talk Management as a discipline also play a decisive role in sub-disciplinary issues of higher education management and leadership. This shows that higher education as a field of study is a multidisciplinary subject.

The focus of this article is not however to deal with all theoretical and conceptual disciplinary issues of higher education, rather it focuses on the application of regional integration theories in explaining the process of higher education harmonization or integration efforts, for example, like the Bologna Process of Europe which started in 1999 and the recent higher education harmonization strategy of the AU - Commission. Policy harmonization and issues of regional integration have been the core domains of political science especially international relations since the end of the Second World War (Cini, 2003). The crisis of the post war order led to the emergence of a

new global political structure. This new global political structure questions the notion of the classical Westphalia concept of state sovereignty where states are assumed to have an absolute dominion over domestic policy formulations and implementations. The growth of multinational corporations, the free flow of capital, the growing power of unaccountable market forces and international organizations has been challenging state sovereignty. The emergence of various supra-national organizations like EU and AU created a variety of regional integration schemes which have the authority to develop collective policies. These have already been reflected on higher education policy reforms in Europe, Latin America and Africa since supranational bodies are competing with nation-states in national higher education policy reforms.

These collective formations at regional level are also partly results of the dynamics of globalization. Held and McGrew (2000) in their globalization debate for example argue that international cooperation and coordination of national policies became necessary arguments for managing the consequences of a globalizing world (Held & McGrew, 2000). The idea is that regional integration could be a collective response to the challenges of globalization. It stimulates regional dependence, yet it can also be translated as a responsive process to the pressures of globalization. But at the same time globalization and regional integration established on the twofold notion of relationship in a sense that regional integration is not always a response to global forces it could also be an integration to stimulate and create the force itself. Globalization brought both common challenges and opportunities for nations that share same geographic, cultural, economic and political context. The challenges of competition for production and dissemination of goods and services lead to the creation of common market area for regulated trade relation, the free movement of labor and capital demanded to have common immigration policies, the knowledge economy required skilled professionals which leads to mobility and raises the issue of quality education, employability of graduates across borders and standardization of qualifications. These common global forces invite supranational institutions along with nation states to harmonize policies as a response to globalization. At the same time these harmonization efforts and regional integration schemes further contribute to the forces of globalization by bringing together nations along common policy areas transcending national sovereignty.

But the heated debate is on the spire of influence of actors in regionalism processes or policy harmonization - *state actors, non-state actors or supranational actors* and on the *process* of regionalism itself as *bottom-up or top-down*. Some researchers like Maurice Doctor (2007) argued that policy integrations at regional level are often trade-driven, bottom-up process of intensifying interaction led by non-state actors and further debated that policy harmonization is a conscious act of states, seeking greater regional cooperation on a range of issues (Doctor, 2007). At earlier stage of the debates, in the beginning of 20th century, Gamble and Payne (1997) argued that regional integrations are processes that involve both evolutionary interaction of non-state actors across borders through time and a conscious political process of decision making among member states to establish institutions (Gamble & Payne, 1997). The argument is that regionalization can explain the evolutionary dynamics of non-state actors in history and policy integration as the political commitment of states to establish regional organization.

Analyzing the degree of interaction in regionalism among member states, the process of policy formulation at regional level and issues of state-sovereignty; scholars have tried to theorize regional integration schemes. The issue of regionalism and policy harmonization in higher education at regional level attracts the interests of academic researchers especially after the adoption of the Bologna Process in Europe in 1999. This actually changed the relation between the European Union and its member states, which is characterized by tensions between national sovereignty in the field of higher education and the drive towards more integration promoted by the European Commission. The issues of education classically have been the jurisdiction of nation-states as clearly stated on the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 (Feldbauer, 2008).

The Bologna Process somehow compromised the jurisdiction of Maastricht Treaty and revived academic debates among researchers redefining the classical relations of nation-states and regional organizations. The Bologna Process also initiated other regional integration and harmonization efforts of higher education systems in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean which has obtained much support from the EU. In implementing the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015), the AU Commission has embarked on a process of developing a framework for harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa. There is a growing feeling across Africa that the continent could benefit from cooperative mechanisms as the Bologna Process. For instance Sall & Ndjaye (2007) argued that '*African inter-academic cooperation can be boosted if it is inspired by cooperation models existing in the European academic space*' (Sall & Ndjay, 2007, p. 52). The Association of African Universities also convinced that '…*higher education in Africa would benefit from the adoption of the Bologna Process, especially in fostering regional collaboration*' (Okeke, 2010, p. 4). All these

regional policy harmonization efforts initiated academic discourse in the field of higher education reforms and regional initiatives. Thus, conceptualizing the notions of higher education reforms and providing theoretical basis for academic discourses is relevant.

The objective of this article is therefore, to conceptually frame the process of higher education policy harmonization in theoretical perspective and attempt to provide framework in the application of regional integration theories of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalist in the field of higher education. These regional integration theories have been used since 1950s explaining economic integration schemes particularly in the context of Europe. But the relevance of them explaining in the current policy integration other than trade and market issues, like higher education policy integration is poorly investigated. Thus, this article is a contribution to the immerging debate on higher education integration and its theoretical foundations in academia.

2. Method

This study is a qualitative literature based theoretical discourse which aims at developing a conceptual framework on the application of regional integration theories on regional policy harmonization of higher education systems. Selected literatures based on their relevance have been thoroughly reviewed. The article based itself on the neo-functionalist and intergovernmentalist assumptions of regional integration and creates a conceptual framework for application of them in higher education discourse. It also took practical examples from the Bologna process of Europe and Harmonization Strategy of AU where it is necessary to substantiate the argument.

3. Conceptualizing Harmonization of Higher Education

The term '*harmonization*' has been used in different contexts sometimes to describe the same phenomena like *integration, cooperation, partnership or collaboration, community, coherence, partnership, alignment*. But one can argue that these concepts simply indicate the extent and scale of integration among constituting states in regional cooperation. The degree of interaction becomes deeper and tighter when we go from cooperation, collaboration, partnership to integration, harmonization, community and interdependence (Knight, 2012). We can also infer that integration of whatever sort is a process which may take various steps based on the degree of commitment of the various actors. The history of European integration can be a good example of such a process of integration which has passed through various stages of cooperation starting from European Coal and Steal Community (ECSC) to the European Economic Community (EEC) and then to European Union (Feldbauer, 2008). The complexity of interactions among actors in the course of these processes also moves from simple and loose cooperation to strong and more tighter integration.

Apart from academic literatures, *harmonization* has also been used in policy documents. For instance, the term was coined in European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as a central element in the Sorbonne Declaration of June 1999 which was signed as architecture of reform of European higher education system (Eriksen, 2003). The African Union has also developed a framework to harmonize the higher educational system in the region and the policy document clearly refers to the process as *harmonization* (Okeke , 2012).The notion of harmonization and its conceptualization is imbedded in the economic theory of convergence and integration (DeLong & Dowrick, 2002). The concept emerged during the industrial revolution in Europe referring the process of creating common economic and market area for free flow of capital and labour in a particular region. Though the theory does not directly refer to the concept of harmonization, it has more or less the same concept and refers to it as '*convergence*' which is frequently used to describe both the objectives and processes of harmonization of different processes including higher education. In macro economic theory, '*convergence*' basically refers to the forces that make different economies more alike (Breslin & Hook, 2002). Looking back to the industrial revolution, those nations whose economies converged were in a '*club*' of varying membership. Convergence is opposed to divergence in this continual alignment and realignment of national economies.

Some economists see '*convergence*' as a narrowing of variance in policy formulation and implementation, for example in distribution of output, productivity levels, and real wage levels, across countries (DeLong & Dowrick, 2002). In other words, it is all about '*assimilation*' to leading ideologies. This concept is associated with harmonization processes in higher education since it involves '*narrowing of variance*' in structural factors, processes, qualification frameworks, quality standards, degree cycles, and credits. Thus, harmonization is more or less synonymous with convergence that coordinates different systems through '*eliminating major differences and creating minimum requirements or standards* (Okeke, 2012). Harmonization could also be understood as the process of creating frameworks through which relationships of actors in international relations is governed. For the most part, the purpose of these efforts is not so much to achieve identical regulations or standards that eliminate local diversities, but to converge on common element to enrich and promote local achievements. In the

context of higher education, it implies access to reliable and transparent information, greater networking between all stakeholders in higher education, and sharing of models of good practice with a view towards improving greater inter-regional mobility, and sharing of resources and bringing together of efforts which are aimed at achieving the same purpose, synchronising (DeLong & Dowrick, 2002).

However, harmonisation as applied to education is not synonymous with *uniformity, standardization, regulation, condensation homogenization or unification* of all higher education systems. Rather, harmonisation refers to the coordination of educational programmes with agreements to minimum academic standards and ensuring equivalence and comparability of qualifications between and within countries. Harmonisation, as it is applied to the African higher education for example, is intended to promote the comparability of degree programmes and recognition of their equivalencies across the continent, thus facilitating the promotion of quality and mobility of both staff and students in the continent (AAU, 2007). Thus, harmonization can be understood as a process of ensuring articulation, both horizontal and vertical, between programs and institutions among various higher education systems. In other words, it is the process of establishing benchmarks for qualifications, program delivery and certifications. Here harmonization may include synchronising of credit systems, quality assurance mechanism, accreditation, recognition of the diplomas, management of quality and language teaching. The general purpose of it is to facilitate comparability, compatibility and the employability of qualifications across regions. At policy level, it implies the process of establishing regional regulatory mechanisms to create common values that promote the competitiveness of regional higher education area (Hoosen et al, 2009).

European Higher Education area, which is established through the Bologna Process, is a very good example of harmonization of higher education systems at regional level. In 1998 four European ministers from *France, Germany, Spain, Great Britain* - responsible for matters of higher education signed a declaration that emphasized their will to harmonize their systems of higher education in Sorbonne and a year later signed the Bologna Declaration in 1999 in Bologna, Italy which created European Higher Education Area by 2010 (Knight, 2012). More than 46 countries are now voluntary members of the Process. It must be noted that however the Bologna Process has inspired other regions towards the restructuring of higher education in line with the Bologna Process; for example, in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia as well as the Arab countries (Okeke, 2012). Some activities are well established programs while others have only been introduced in the last few years showing the increased interest in intra-regional cooperation. In 2004, the African Union released a major document about harmonization of higher education programs in Africa that focused on building closer links among higher education institutions, networks, national systems, regional university associations and other key higher education actors (AAU, 2007). An interesting feature of this initiative is the idea of creating a pan-African higher education and research space that emphasises on strengthening the capacity and role of regional higher education area. As a trend of direction, however, harmonization of higher education in Africa should look as into a process of mutual recognition of the contents and quality of educational programmes, degrees and certificates in different nations and regions, with appreciation of their equivalences or comparability within and outside one's own nation or region.

Harmonization of higher education systems at regional level, as explained in both the Bologna document of Europe and Harmonization strategy of AU, has been initiated to address common regional challenges due to intensifying competitive pressures to remain relevant in the current globalize world, higher education institutions as well as national governments are forced to introduce restructuring programmes in areas such as governance, quality assurance or curricula development. These initiatives are undertaken to ensure competitiveness in their respective higher education systems. The rationale for this is based on the belief that such an initiative will help to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of procedures and policies, attainment of comparability among qualifications, and possibly the standardization of curricula, so as to facilitate professional mobility for both employment and further study.

Here, we have to bear in mind that only few national higher education systems can claim to operate in total isolation from their international environment and at the same time any effort of harmonizing higher education systems at regional level rarely go without the general scheme of regional integration in the region in general. Systemic changes and policy shifts in higher education are linked in various ways to what is happening in the international arena, as well as to developments in other sectors (Okeke, 2010). Higher education reforms in each European country are now influenced by the proposition of the Bologna Process; thus it is difficult for national higher education systems to operate in isolation outside the context of the region. The higher education reform efforts promoted by UNESCO and the WB since 1980s in Africa also indicate that national higher education policy reforms are a subset of global influences. This will lead us into looking at grand theories of regional integration to better understand various issues of harmonization processes. Thus, the next part of this chapter deals with the grand theories of regional integration.

4. Theories of Regional Integration and Higher Education

Theories of regional integration are broadly categorized as grand and middle-range theories. Grand theories are theories that analyze regional integrations at supra-national level and the leading theories in this regard are theories of *neo-functionalism* and *intergovernmentalism* (Laursen, 2010). On the other hand, middle-range theories are theories that explain the relationship between regional organizations and state institutions, a very good example of which is the *neo-institutionalism* (Olsen, 2007). Middle range theories are important in explaining the response of national institutions to regional integration or policy harmonization; on the other hand grand theories explain the process of regional integration itself not its response from national institutions. Though both levels of theory are relevant in regional integration discourse; this particular article focuses only on the grand theory. Theories of regional integration provide some theoretical foundation in studying the nature, process and outcome of regionalism trends since the efforts to integrate higher education policies are part of a more general process of integrating sovereign states in new political and institutional order. Here, we will look at into the theoretical assumptions of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism and analyze their relevance for studies of higher education system integration.

4.1 Neo-Functionalism

Neo-functionalism is rooted in the liberal tradition of international relations studies (Breslin & Hook, 2002). This theory was initially developed by Ernst Haas in his work *'The Uniting of Europe'* (1958) and applied by Leon Lindberg in '*The Political Dynamics of European Integration' (1963)* (Laursen, 2010). It is a theory that places major emphasis on the role of non-state actors. It starts from the realization of the significance of interdependence, not only between states, but also between areas of human activities. According to Ernst Haas, the father of neo-functionalism, integration results from the need to shift specific functions away from exclusively nation-state control toward supra-national institutions. These new units would hold the decision-making power once enjoyed by the nation-state (Wiener & Diez, 2009). Neo-functionalism also states that the causal mechanism for this transfer is the increasing complexity of issues at national government level requiring highly trained specialists who would tend to solve problems at the international level (Haas, 1958 cited by Krapohl, 2008). Regional integration is explained as a process which is interlinked across various sectors.

Haas (2004) also theorized three important methods that would enable regional integration to be achieved; these are *the principle of 'spillover'*, *the transfer of domestic allegiances* and *technocratic automaticity*. The principle of *spillover* is the notion that integration between states in one economic sector will create strong incentives for integration in other sectors, in order to fully get the benefits of integration in the sector in which it started. That means spillover is the process whereby a given action, related to a specific goal, creates a situation in which the original goal can be assured only by taking further actions, which in turn create a further condition and a need for more action. For instance, the full integration of the coal and steel sectors would not be achieved without integration of other sectors, such as transport in order to facilitate the movement of raw materials and products (Krapohl, 2008). The theory explained the integration of the current Europe as a gradual process and step by step integration of various economic components throughout history. It states that integration should take shape in steps, each building on the last and that one form of integration necessitates other integrations.

Neo-functionalists claim that as the process of integration speed-up, interest groups and associations within the pluralistic societies of nation-states will transfer their allegiance away from national institutions towards the supra-national institutions (Wiener & Diez, 2009). This will happen because they will, in theory, come to realize that these regionally formed institutions are better channels through which to pursue their material interests than the pre-existing national institutions. The theory also states that greater regulatory complexity is then needed which is termed as technocratic automaticity which will happen since as integration proceeds, the supra-national institutions set up to direct integration process by themselves sponsoring further integration as they become more powerful and more autonomous of the member states. Taking the above conditions into considerations, Haas argued that political integration will then become an inevitable side effect of integration in economic sectors (Ibid).

As the process of integration proceeds, it is assumed that values will undergo change, that interests will be redefined in terms of regional rather than purely national orientation, and that the former set of separate national group values will gradually be superseded by a new and geographically larger set of beliefs. For example, the removal of tariffs on goods passing between national borders in the European Economic Community has illustrated the further need for the European Commission to harmonize national tax laws and regulations which lead to price discrimination, reduce inter-state competition and, contrary to the aims of the market, leave national firms at a disadvantage in other European markets (Charlemagne, 2010). Explaining the emergence of new

regional values and their contribution for effective policy harmonization, Leon Lindberg (1963) stated four important preconditions 1) Central institutions and policies should be established and developed, because only these institutions can assure and promote the *'regional view'* as well as solve disputes among member states; 2) Their capacity to implement those tasks should go well beyond the mandate of national institutions; 3) Their tasks should be inherently expansive; 4) There should be some links between the interests of member states and the process of integration (Lindberg, 1963, pp. 7-13).

Haas provided a self-criticism of his theory in the Book he published with Leon Lindberg and Stuart Scheingold in 1971. He noted several theoretical limitations of neo-functionalism, but two of them clearly stood out. The first criticism was the *problem of transferability*, which means the theory could not be applicable to other context of regional integrations outside Europe because of neo-functionalism's deep roots in the analysis of processes of social change and decision making in plural and industrialized societies. The other criticism of the theory was related to the failure to predict the outcome of European integration which can be stated as *the problem of dependent variable*. Neo-functionalism had started by defining integration as a process without any specific end-point. Because of this, it was not viable to agree upon the proper ways to measure the accomplishment of integration schemes.

The dependant variable dilemma was profoundly intricate. Haas estimates that it could be understood that the end of integration was a supra-national society, then it might be possible to achieve such an outcome without the means stated by neo-functionalism, in which case the latter would be inaccurate. Mainly because of these two reasons, Haas somehow demotes neo-functionalism to the status of pre-theory stating that *'[it does] not now provides an explanation of a recurring series of events made up of dimensions of activity causally linked to one another.'* (Haas E., 1971, p. 19). These criticisms eventually led to the discussion of another theory which actually put nation-state and sovereignty as the main unit of analysis. This theory is called *intergovernmentalism* and explained regional integration as more of formal and top-down process.

4.2 Intergovernmentalism

Based on the criticisms of neo-functionalism, prominent intergovernmentalists like Stanley Hoffmann (1982) and Andrew Moravcsik (1993) emphasized the importance of national governments in the process of regional integrations. They underlined that national governments would always endorse their interests within a broader system. In order to show the limits of the functional method, Hoffman (1982) argued that, in fact, it was the logic of diversity which prevailed and restricted the spillover effects of the neo-functionalist theory. The main assumption of intergovernmentalists is that after years of European integration the prevailing role of the nation-state is still there and is capable of shaping further the process of supra-national integration '*the most striking reality is not the frequent and well-noted impotence of the so-called sovereign state, it is its survival*' (Hoffmann, 1982, p. 21).

Unlike neo-functionalism's spillover interpretation, intergovernmentalists strongly emphasized the major role of states in international politics and associate themselves with realist thought of international relations. They clearly state that the action of states is determined significantly by national interests and for reasons of defending national sovereignty (Moravcsik, 1993). According to this theory, the attainment of integration depends upon the ability of nation-states to adjust and respond to the cooperative agreements that define integration. This argument gives the foundation for the viewpoint that regards integration as a result of negotiations among nation-states to create cooperative agreements that develop into further integration. Originally, intergovernmentalism is one of the arguments developed to comprehend the process of European integration but it has also been used in explaining other policy integration schemes of different regions. According to Michelle Cini (2003), intergovernmentalists believe that cooperation is founded on the rational behavior of governments as they search for common goals to deal with the policy issues that tackle them (Cini, 2003).

Therefore, the intergovernmental arrangement highlights that the main advocate of regional integration is the state's search for power and interests. This argument continues the tradition that integration is a means for member countries to attain domestic policy preferences through regional negotiation. Through negotiation, regional member countries converge economic policy in order to improve negative externalities due to economic interdependence while retaining national sovereignty. Intergovernmentalists argue that regional integration and policy harmonization is a bottom-up process unlike the top-down assumptions of neo-functionalism. In the process of higher education policy harmonization, the role of supra-national bodies and nation-states, and their sphere of influence on policy directions quite differ from region to region. But these theories give us a perspective to look at into trends of policy harmonization at regional level.

5. The Application of Regional Integration Theories on Higher Education

The current trend in regional integration and policy harmonization indicates that there is more emphasis on

economic and political regional integration and growing labor mobility within regions. There is popular mass culture moving within regions about increased intra-regional collaboration among knowledge communities. Moreover there is more intra-regional academic mobility, networks and collaborative activities than ever. Harmonization as applied in higher education implies the adoption of common platform of standards to converge national higher education structures through alignment of systems like quality assurance, academic credit system, degree levels, qualifications' recognition, qualification frameworks and ITC platforms. Recognition of qualification is a very important dimension of the harmonization, regardless of whether it involves degrees, competences, or the acknowledgement of prior learning outcomes. Recognition of qualification is crucial to mobility, life-long learning, access, employability and ultimately to the very existence of a coherent higher education area.

The application of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism theories of integration is vital in explaining the policy trends of regional policy harmonization processes like higher education. As explained above, neo-functionalism focuses on more of informal, top-down (in a sense that supra-national organizations have more influence than nation-states in policy integration), ad hoc, proactive, gradual and internally driven kind of policy harmonization. On the other hand, intergovernmentalism explains policy harmonization as more of formal, bottom-up, intentional, quantum leap, externally driven and reactive process. These factors characterize the development and governance of any change process and are central to the analysis of the stages of the regionalization process. In this perspective, harmonization of higher education system at regional level can be explained based on the above variables stated in the theories.

5.1 Actors in Policy Harmonization

The application of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism theories of integration is vital in explaining the policy trends of regional policy harmonization processes like higher education. Here it could be argued that both neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism acknowledge the presence of state actors, non-state actors (universities and their communities, research insinuations, academic and professional associations, etc) and supranational bodies (like EU and AU commissions) in regional integration and higher education policy harmonization processes. However the role they play in the process of agenda setting and policy formulation varies in their interpretations. Neo-functionalist focuses on the role of non-state actors and supranational institutions in the process of policy harmonization. The assumption is that nation states are losing their exclusive classical sovereignty on policy formulation over time because of the increasing role of non-state actors and the increasing interdependence of institutions across borders in the current global economy. Thus, the initiatives of policy reforms in one sector in a particular nation have a spillover effect over policy issues across borders. In such cases it is the role of supranational bodies which have more pronounced role than nation-states to coordinate joint reform efforts among nations. The supposition here is that, since the issue is harmonizing policies and integrating structures among nations at regional level, the process is considered to be beyond the capacity of one nation-state and it has to be governed by supra-national bodies. The notion of neo-functionalism which states integration as 'informal' process explains the bilateral and multilateral relations of non-state actors which are not mediated by national governments (for example higher education institutional co-operations through regional organizations). In this case, institutions by themselves may start integration activities within their autonomous jurisdiction without major involvement of the government as such. Establishing joint Degree programs, curriculum harmonization, common quality assurance mechanisms, sharing leadership styles etc can be achieved among higher educational institutions across and beyond a region. This international interaction may be facilitated by supra-national or regional organizations like EU or AU. Here neo-functionalism states that the old role of nation states is now over shadowed by the increasing role of supranational institutions. The role played by regional organizations and higher education institutions is much important than national governments. Intergovernmentalism on the other hand asserts that even though non-state actors are more proactive in reform agendas, issues cannot be articulated and ratified as policy without the major role of nation states. Thus, the initiatives and the process of policy harmonization are mainly done by nation-states or governments as intergovernmentalists claim. Higher education policy reforms could be initiated and prescribed to higher education institutions by nation-states but regional organizations may be used in the processes if their involvement is believed to achieve national interest (Knight, 2012).

The other important factor that can be inferred from these theories could be the dynamics of policy integration itself. Here the dynamics of the actors as subject or object of policy integration could explain their reactive or proactive nature. The idea is to see or identify which actors in the process of integration own and actively play a role in the harmonization process as subjects of the policy or which actors actually put aside or marginalized in the process as objects are being affected by the outcome. The notion of subject and object of policy explains the

degree of involvement of stakeholders - students, academics and faculties, universities, higher education ministries, employers, supra-national bodies - in higher education policy reform and integration process. The other issue here is, whether harmonization of higher education systems is an end by itself or a means to some other end. Neo-functionalists consider non-state actors as subjects of policy integration that arguably play active role in the process of policy harmonization and they consider this as an internal process. On the other hand, intergovernmentalists consider non-state actors as objects of policy integration and they emphasize on the role of sovereign states as the subjects of policy integrations. Intergovernmentalists explain policy integration mainly as an external process owned by states along with other ends but neo-functionalists believe that policy integration could be achieved with the coordination efforts of institutions themselves without the major role of nation-states.

5.2 Process in Policy Harmonization: Bottom-Up vs. Top-Down

Bottom-up or top-down process of policy integration is another key variable in the above theories of integration. If nation-states are the determinant factors for the success of any policy integration and if the presence of supra-national organization is simply to execute national interests, this is arguably the notion of bottom-up approach whose premise is intergovernmentalist. Here the whole process of regional policy initiation related to higher education harmonization, formulation and implementation is significantly and authoritatively owned by nation-states. However, this may not always be true because in some cases policy integration may be initiated by supra-national bodies and one policy integration may initiate policy integration in spillover effect. The European Union's Lisbon Strategy for jobs and growth could be a good example of this. The EU Heads of State and Government, meeting in Lisbon for the Union's Spring Council of 2000, pledged to work towards making the EU the most '*dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world*' by 2010 (Keeling, 2006). In such cases, we might see regional policy initiatives coming from regional organizations instead of nation-states which is called a top-down approach and this is the premise of Neo-functionalism.

Explaining the process of policy integration, the assumption of regional integration theories can be either incremental or quantum leap. A gradual or incremental approach states that policy integration is not an outcome of political decisions of states rather it is an evolutionary process of step by step cooperation of non-state actors which culminate into supra-national political decisions at regional level. In this regional integration starts with gradual integration of various policies and it is a step by step process in which the integration of one sector initiates the need for integration in another sector through time. In this perspective the Bologna Process of Europe is not considered as an outcome of a political decision made in 1999 in Bologna, Italy rather it is part of the long process of regional cooperation which started in 1950s and culminated into the current EU. The implication is that Bologna Process cannot be seen outside the context of a long history of European integration. The incremental approach is the assumption of the neo-functionalist. A quantum leap approach on the other hand states that policy integration is an outcome of political decision of nation-states through a thoroughly negotiated interest of states. It is not evolutionary instead revolutionary process of interest articulation at regional level which is the assumption of intergovernmentalist theory of integration.

5.3 Current Trends in Higher Education Harmonization

The above theories of regional integration give us perspective to explain convergence or harmonization, to identify the substance or topic under investigation, to explain the aim and process of convergence, and to analyze the role of actors. As explained in the policy documents of the Bologna Process and the Higher Education Harmonization Strategy document of AU, the creation of higher education area is set to be the end objectives of harmonization processes in their respective regions. Apart from that, greater compatibility and comparability of higher education and increasing international competitiveness are also the objectives of higher education convergence which are quite hard to measure. Looking at the actual action lines agreed upon to achieve these aims however, one notices that they are largely confined to the teaching and learning-side of higher education: degree systems, measurement of student workload, student mobility, and curricular development. The governance side of higher education, including questions of steering, management capacity, and funding, is largely bypassed, with the exception of quality assurance (Witte, 2006).

Harmonization of higher education systems or policy convergence in general is becoming a phenomenon not only in Europe but in other regions like Latin America, South East Asia and recently in Africa as well. The European effort towards integration and harmonization began with the Bologna Process. This effort is considered to be relatively more systematic and more institutionalized as compared to other regional initiatives, due to the fact that the Bologna Process has been integrated into the larger framework of the European Union (EU) (Keeling, 2006). The focus area and the action lines undertaken were establishing the three-cycle degree system and system of credits, creating a common quality assurance system, encouraging mobility of students and staff as

well as promoting a European dimension in higher education and enhancing the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (Teichle, 2009). The neo-functionalist explanation of regional integration best explain the higher education harmonization efforts of Europe since the role of universities, research institutions, regional quality assurance agencies in collaboration with the EU-commission play pronounced role in the process than governments. Moreover, the Bologna Process could be understood as a culminating effect of various policy integrations or *spilover* effects of various harmonization activities in other sectors since prior to higher education integration, the members of EU managed to create well structured common economic area, immigration and security policies. Through the 1993 Maastricht Treaty, EU members even further redesigned to enhance European political and economic integration by creating single currency, a unified foreign and security policy, common citizenship rights and by advancing cooperation in the area of immigration, asylum and judicial affairs (Mencinger, 2004).

The development of harmonization of higher education in Latin America and the Caribbean is not only inspired by the Bologna process of Europe but it also received both technical and funding support form EU Commission. Latin America and Caribbean nations together with European countries agreed to work towards a common space in higher education by the year 2015 (Cetina, E. 2005). Though the policy components are not stipulated in clear terms like the Bologna Process, the general objective of the harmonization process in the region is to create a comparable and transferrable degree structure that facilitates mobility of students and professors in the region. They have already established national and regional quality assurance institutions and are working on the coordination of them in facilitating the harmonization process. But the process of harmonization in the Latin American countries has been criticized for the fact that it did not involve universities and research institutions in the process of policy formulation rather it simply took them as subjects of the policy.

In implementing the Plan of Action for the Second Decade of Education for Africa (2006-2015), the AU Commission has embarked on a process of developing a framework for harmonization of Higher Education Programmes in Africa. The rationale for this is based on the belief that such an initiative will help to foster cooperation in information exchange, harmonization of procedures and policies, attainment of comparability among qualifications, and possibly the standardization of curricula, so as to facilitate professional mobility for both employment and further study (Hoosen et al, 2009). According to the African Union Higher Education Programmes (AU HEP) harmonization of higher education in the continent is intended to facilitate the comparability of qualifications awarded across the continent and help drive quality assurance measures, which will ultimately contribute to greater quality of education in Africa. Creating a mechanism for benchmarking and comparison of qualifications will allow professional mobility for employment and further study, as well as expanded job markets.

One of the challenges of applying regional integration theories to other context like Africa is that from the very outset these theories are created in the context of Europe and it is hardly possible, if not impossible, to find a clear line of explanation to adopt these theories into African context. But in the case of higher education harmonization, the role of regional actors like Au-commission as a facilitator to bring higher education Ministers of different African governments on discussion forums, and Association of African University (AAU) as a co-player at technical level can be more witnessed than other actors like universities, professors or students. Moreover, the idea of harmonization was proposed before converging other functional sectors like immigration policies, wider economic areas, and labor policies. Thus the underlining premises of neo-functionalist - the dominant role of non-state actors (universities, professors, students, research institutions) in policy convergence and the principle of functional spilover (means the integration of one sectors across nations will generate functional pressures for the integration of associated sectors) does not exist which make us to think the assumptions of inter governmentalist. But in 2011 the AU Commission, the European Commission, AAU, representatives from Ministries and agencies started the African Higher Education Harmonisation and Tuning proposal in Africa and Sixty universities across the continent were selected to participate in five subject groups - medicine, agriculture, mechanical engineering, teacher education and civil engineering- which could be an indication of the involvement of new actors in the process but the tuning process is not harmonization in strict sense since it does not necessitate universities to integrate whole curricula but obligates them to find a common language, not only among each other but also with their neighbouring community.

Generally speaking, nowadays, trends in many regions are moving towards the creation of common space in higher education to address critical issues of access, quality, equity, relevance, employability and mobility. The European Union is widely recognized as being one of the earliest initiators in harmonizing regional higher education through initiating improvements by using a systematic and institutionalized approach. The Central and Latin American countries seized the opportunity to cooperate with the European Union to reap the benefits of

regional harmonization within the higher education sector. And the initiatives taken by the AU-Commission are also on pipeline. Thus the application of conceptual and theoretical framework for studying such regional phenomenon is an important academic step in conceptualizing policy initiatives in which this article has tried.

6. Conclusion

Globalization has been pushing various socio-economic and political structures of the world to be more alike than ever. The challenges of higher education is no more confined to a particular nation since the world is interconnected because of liberalization of economy, free movement of labour and capital, and the advancement of communication technologies which make distance more or less irrelevant. Knowledge becomes the driving force of economic growth and development in addition to physical capital. To improve the quality of higher education, its relevance and accessibility, to facilitate transferability and comparability of degrees among nations, to facilitate the mobility and employability of students, regions have been engaging in various cooperation schemes to face common challenges and attain greater excellence. This process of converging objectives and aims together in higher education polices at regional level is termed as harmonization. This harmonization process at regional level raises theoretical debates among higher education researchers on how to conceptualize the current trend of regional integration and higher education policy harmonization. This article has discussed the relevance of two grand theories of regional integration namely neo-functional and intergovernmentalist.

The article further argued that harmonization is not synonymous with other concepts of regional cooperation like cooperation, collaboration, community, coherence, partnership, and alignment but at the same time all these concepts explain the same notion which is integration but in different intensity or extent. The degree of interaction become deeper and tighter when we go from cooperation, collaboration, partnership to harmonization, integration, community and interdependence. The two important distinguishing features of harmonization are that the process is owned by nation-states but the activities are facilitated by regional institutions and harmonization should assume regional or national policy level. The application of neo-functionalism and intergovernmentalism theories of integration is also argued to be vital in explaining the policy trends of regional policy harmonization processes like higher education. As it has been discussed, neo-functionalism is important in explaining regional policy trends as more of informal, top-down (in a sense that supra-national organizations have more influence than nation-states in policy integration), ad hoc, proactive, gradual and internally driven. On the other hand, intergovernmentalism explains policy harmonization as more of formal, bottom-up, intentional, quantum leap, externally driven and reactive process. These factors characterize the development and governance of any change process and are central to the analysis of the stages of the regionalization process.

Since there have been some initiatives made in different regions like in Europe, Latin America, South East Asia and recently in Africa about harmonization of higher education systems, such theoretical debate and discussion is believed to be important. This article gave a perspective as framework of analysis but needs to be debated and the objective is to initiate academic arguments about it.

References

AAU. (2007). *The Contribution of Higher Education to National Education Systems: Current Challenges for Africa.* Forum on Higher Education, Research & Knowledge 2nd Regional Research Seminar for Africa: UNESCO.

Breslin, S., & Hook, G. (2002). Micro-regionalism and World Order: Concepts, Approaches and Implications. In S. Breslin, & G. Hook (Eds.), *Microregionalism and World Order* (pp. 1-22). Basingstoke: Macmillan. http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9781403940155

Cetina, E. (2005). *Regional Integration Processes and their Dynamics for External Quality Assurance: What can other regions learn from the Bologna Process?* Discussant paper for the International Institute for Educational Planning. Paris: UNESCO.

Charlemagne. (2010, October 28). *Europe's need for e-freedom.* Retrieved June 20, 2012, from The Economist: http://www.economist.com/node/17361454

Cini, M. (2003). Intergovernmentalism. In M. Cini (Ed.), *European Union politics* (pp. 93-108). Oxford: OUP.

DeLong, J., & Dowrick, S. (2002). Globalisation and Convergence. In M. Bordo, A. Taylor, & J. G. Williamson (Eds.), *Globalisation in Historical Perspective.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Doctor, M. (2007). Why bother with inter-regionalism? Negotiations for a European Union – Mercosur agreement. *Journal of Common Market Studies, 45*(2), 281-314. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.2007.00712.x

Eriksen, E., & Neyer, J. (2003). The Forging of deliberative supranationalism in the EU? In E. Eriksen, C. Joerges, & J. Neyer (Eds.), *European governance, deliberation and the quest for democratisation.* Arena: Arena.

Feldbauer, F. (2008). *Soft coordination of European higher education. Dissertation.* Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaften: Universität Wien.

Gamble, A., & Payne, A. (1997). Regionalism and World Order. *Journal of Latin American Studies*, *29*(2), 495-548.

Haas, E. (1971). The Study of Regional Integration: Reflections on the Joy and Anguish of Pretheorizing . In I. L. Scheingold (Ed.), *Regional Integration Theory and Research* (pp. 3-42). Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Held, D., & McGrew, A. (2000). *The Global Transformations Reader: An Introduction to the Globalization Debate.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hoffmann, S. (1982). Reflections on the Nation-State in Western Europe Today. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *21*(1), 21-38. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1982.tb00637.x

Hoosen, S., Butcher, N., Khamati, B., & Njenga. (2009). Harmonization of Higher Education Programmes: A Strategy for the African Union. *African Integration Review*, *3*(1).

Keeling, R. (2006). The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Research Agenda: The European Commission's expanding role in higher education discourse. *European Journal of Education*, *41*(2), 203-223. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2006.00256.x

Knight, J. (2012, September 15). *A Conceptual Framework for the Regionalization of Higher Education: Application to Asia.* Retrieved from East-West Center Collaboration Experties Leadership: http://www.eastwestcenter.org/education/international-forum-education-2020/education-leadership-institute/ 2012-institute

Krapohl, S. (2008). New Institutionalism Meets International Political Economy: A New Approach to the Study of Regional Integration Dynamics In- and Outside of Europe. *Working Paper Prepared for Presentation at the GARNET Conference 'The European Union in International Affairs'*. Brussels.

Laursen, F. (2010). *Comparative Regional Integration: Europe and Beyond. The International Political Economy of New Regionalisms Series.* Ashgate Publishing, Ltd.

Lindberg, L. (1963). *The Political Dynamics of European Integration. Stanford*. Stanford: Stanford University Press .

Mencinger, J. (2004). *Can University survive the Bologna Process? Invited plenary lecture at the symposium 'Socio-economic perspectives in the Life Sciences'*. Vienna.

Moravcsik, A. (1993). Preferences and Power in the European Community: A Liberal Intergovernmental Approach. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, *31*(4), 473-524. http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-5965.1993.tb00477.x

Okeke, C. (2010). A Neglected Impediment to True Africanisation of African Higher Education Curricula: Same Agenda, Differential Fee Regimes. *Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa*, *8*(2), 39-52.

Okeke, C. (2012). A Neglected Impediment to True Africanisation of African Higher Education Curricula: Same Agenda, Differential Fee Regimes. *Journal of Higher Education in Africa*, *8*(2), 39-52.

Olsen, J. (2007). *Europe in Search of Political Order. An institutional perspective on unity/diversity, citizens/their helpers, democratic design/historical drift, and the co-existence of orders*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sall, H. N., & Ndjay, B. D. (2007). Higher Education in Africa: Between Perspectives Opened by the Bologna Process and the Commodification of Education. *European Education*, *39*(4), 43-57. http://dx.doi.org/10.2753/EUE1056-4934390403

Teichle, U. (2009). Student Mobility and Staff Mobility in the European Higher Education Area beyond 2010. In B. M. Kehm, J. Huisman, & B. Stensaker (Eds.), *The European Higher Education Area: Perspectives on a Moving Target.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Wiener, A., & Diez, T. (2009). *European Integration Theory*. Oxford: Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Witte, J. K. (2006). *Change of Degrees and Degrees of Change: Comparing Adaptations of European Higher Education Systems in the Context of the Bologna Process*. Hamburg: CHEPS/UT, Postbus 217, 7500 AE Enschede.