The Effects of International Organizations on Regional Higher Education Policy in Europe and South America

Using a theoretical model based on historical institutionalism and constructivism, this study examines the direct and indirect roles of UNESCO and the World Bank in the three most prominent European and South American regional higher education initiatives: the Bologna Process and Lisbon Strategy in Europe and MERCOSUR Educativo in South America.

Overall, European regional higher education initiatives have been more successful than South American initiatives. The study argues that European regional policies have been effectively institutionalized because of the supranational nature of the EU, the long history of regional cooperation, the large pool of regional economic resources and the cooperative engagement with IOs. Conversely, it is argued that South American regional higher education policies have not been fully institutionalized because of the intergovernmental nature of regional organizations like MERCOSUR, the short history of regional cooperation, the limited pool of regional economic resources and the non-cooperative engagement with IOs.

In terms of engagement with IOs, the success of regional higher education policies appears to be most strongly correlated to direct IO engagement. Indirect IO engagement has had mixed effects on regional higher education policies depending on the region. More specifically, UNESCO has been associated with direct, positive regional engagement while the World Bank has been associated with indirect, negative regional engagement.

In the future, IOs are likely to play a limited role in European and South American regional higher education policies. In Europe, the consolidation of past regional reforms only allows for indirect IO involvement. In South America, there is greater potential for direct, positive IO involvement, though if the past is a measure of the future, there is little reason to be optimistic about regional higher education policies in the coming years.