The Europeanisation of Higher Education in the Netherlands

JUDITH LITJENS
University of Edinburgh, UK

ABSTRACT This article examines the extent to which higher education policy in the Netherlands is becoming Europeanised. This issue is explored through the case of the Bologna Process and the impact of Bachelor-Master’s (BAMA) Programmes on Dutch higher education policy. Changes in higher education, such as increasing competitiveness and decentralisation, have increased the need for new regulations on a European level. Although the European Union does not have much legal authority in the policy section in question, Europeanisation of higher education is becoming increasingly apparent. The Bologna Agreement, in particular, has been a major push for the integration of the European dimension in Dutch higher education policy. Besides giving a general literature overview of the policy development and implementation of the Bologna Agreement, this article discusses the effects of the Bologna Process on the Dutch Ministry of Education, the VSNU (Association of Dutch Universities) and Dutch higher education institutions. Some interesting insights are provided by interviews that were held with officials working in these sectors.

Introduction

The European Union (EU) has no legal influence over higher education and there is no unified European education policy. Nevertheless, there is generally considered to be a European layer: 'The collective education policy defined, individually and jointly, by decision makers at all levels in Europe – from local to national, from regional to global – that establishes a basis for a European education' (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 131). As European member states agree upon several common principles, a European model of education is created (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 131).

The main challenge faced by higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe is the development towards a knowledge economy and society. This challenge can be linked to the Europeanisation, internationalisation and globalisation of the economic, social, political and cultural setting in which HEIs have to act. Furthermore, HEIs have to deal with the impact of new information and communication technologies (Van der Wende, 2004, p. 9).

These external challenges are the result of the processes of globalisation and Europeanisation, which have been major incentives for countries to revise their higher education policies (Green, 2002). While the modern university is traditionally a national institution, the last two decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a trend towards increased international dimensions in higher education, and within Europe towards Europeanisation of higher education policy (Van der Wende, 2004, p. 9).

Europeanisation describes cooperation between EU countries, aimed at increasing stability and economic growth within Europe (Van der Wende, 2004, p. 10). In higher education, Europeanisation means preserving the differences of structure and system, while seeking similar outcomes (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 132). The increasing influence of Europe in higher education implies a shift from government to governance, including changes in processes of regulation (Lindblad et al, 2002, p. 617).

This article shows how the process of Europeanisation might be understood and illustrated in a context where education policy remains at the national level and little formal regulation exists. In
line with this statement, the article will focus on the impact of Europeanisation on Dutch higher education policy. This issue will be explored through the case of the Bologna Process and the impact of Bachelor-Master’s (BAMA) programmes on Dutch higher education policy in particular.

**The European Dimension in Higher Education Policy**

Globalising pressures have introduced considerable challenges for higher education policy. There is no longer a single society to which a university can be expected to respond (Enders, 2004, p. 363). This reflects the significant level of change that the higher education sector has to deal with. Since the university regulatory and funding context is still national, and universities’ contribution to national cultures is still significant, universities can be considered as national institutions. However, since they are affected by globalisation, it is essential for them to adapt their systems in order to respond effectively to this process. One such new method is the network approach where different actors interact. In the higher education policy-making process, the actors would roughly be different national governments, the European Commission and the different universities. In order to respond to the process of globalisation, these actors cooperate in policy networks.

Europeanisation in higher education has become more obvious since the European Commission (EC) developed education programmes, enhancing its involvement in higher education policy. The shift from the First Action Programme (1976) to prospective Erasmus Decision (1987) (Beukel, 1993, p. 158) reflected a second phase of policy making. The Treaty of Maastricht introduced the third phase.

The Treaty of Maastricht recognised a formal competence of the Community in the field of education for the first time (De Witte, 1992, p. 88). Article 126 of the Treaty sets out the general rules concerning the EU’s involvement in higher education. It states that:

> The Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between member states and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action, while fully respecting the responsibility of the member states for the content of teaching and the organisation of education systems and their linguistic and cultural diversity. (Treaty of Maastricht, 1992, Art. 126)

Besides formally establishing the EU’s involvement in higher education, Article 126 strongly insists on subsidiarity in that it respects the primary responsibility of the national (or regional) authorities in the field of education (De Witte, 1992, p. 88). Coordination between different higher education systems is stimulated by encouraging cooperation between member states. Article 126 thus enhances the chance that results of negotiations – even though they are not legally binding – are integrated into national policy making.

It goes without saying that the integration of the European dimension in higher education takes time. Besides the practical difficulty that member states encounter when trying to ‘Europeanise’ their higher education systems, countries generally believe that the formulation of education policies should remain at the national level (Van der Wende & Huisman, 2004, p. 33). It can be argued that the attitude of member states towards this topic suggests some reluctance in adjusting their higher education policies.

Since most member states consider education to be a reflection of their national identity, they do not show too much enthusiasm as European intervention in this area increases (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 132). They do recognise, however, that Europeanisation of higher education is inevitable. It can be argued that member states are incorporating European guidelines and discourses as the only way to overcome educational and social difficulties: ‘The strength of these guidelines is seen in their acceptance by member states with a sense of inevitability’ (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 133). As everything is driven by the knowledge economy, countries are more or less forced to support European programmes, in order not to fall behind.

One of the main examples of programmes that were initiated with the aim to increase Europeanisation of higher education is the Bologna Declaration (1999). The Bologna Process has been a major push for the recognition and integration of the European dimension in national higher education policy. Although the Bologna Declaration is not established by the Commission, it can still be placed in a European context, since it enhances the European dimension in higher
education by establishing convergence in national higher education policies. Moreover, it does receive support from the Commission and it fits in the framework of lifelong learning.

**The Bologna Process**

As pointed out earlier, the Europeanisation of higher education policy is a recent phenomenon. Since the Bologna Agreement is the first document that has had a significant influence on national higher education systems, it reflects a major push for the integration of the European dimension in national higher education policies.

In June 1999, representatives from 29 European countries gathered in Bologna to sign an agreement aimed at ‘achieving greater compatibility and comparability in their diverse higher education systems over the next decade’ (Sedgwick, 2003). The aim of Bologna is for the different countries to work together on an education project in order to meet the challenges of globalisation. Since the Bologna Declaration forms the basis for reforming the structures of European higher education systems in a convergent way, it can be considered a turning point in the development of European higher education.

The Bologna Agreement is more than a vague political statement, since it is a binding commitment to an action programme. Bologna defines the common goal as follows: ‘to create a European space for higher education in order to enhance the employability and mobility of citizens and to increase the international competitiveness of European higher education’ (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 4). This statement is clearly in line with the challenges that globalisation has brought forward. The Bologna Declaration is the first document to recognise the issue of creating a supra-national space for higher educational policy. Bologna lifts the policy process in the field of education to a higher (European) level, where common European rather than national ideas should design education policy for the future.

In order to achieve the Bologna goals, a common framework of readable and comparable degrees has to be adopted. Therefore, undergraduate and postgraduate levels (a two-tier system) have to be introduced in all the countries that have signed the Declaration. The first degree (undergraduate) can be no shorter than three years, it has to be clearly relevant to the labour market and the curriculum should have a ‘European’ content, orientation and organisation. Furthermore, a system of accreditation and a European dimension in quality assurance are also part of the Bologna objectives. Finally, the free mobility of students is emphasised (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 4).

One of the major actors in the Bologna Process are the HEIs, which possess considerable independence and autonomy. Firstly, they have the biggest influence in the main educational reform that Bologna aims to pursue: the introduction of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. While the Ministry steers the Bachelor-Master’s (BAMA) process from a distance, HEIs are responsible for changes in the content of their curricula. First of all, the introduction of Master’s courses especially aims at increasing student mobility by attracting postgraduate students from all over the world. Secondly, Bologna advises HEIs to set up networks in order to establish joint curriculum development and increase student and teacher mobility. Finally, HEIs are expected to define the next steps in higher education reform, implying an increasing influence of the HEIs in the process (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 6).

**Trends III and IV Reports**

The Trends III (2003) and IV (2005) Reports, prepared by the European University Association (EUA), capture the most important trends concerning Bologna reforms. The Trends IV report states that awareness of and support for the Bologna Process have increased considerably during the previous two years (2003-2005) (EUA, 2005, p. 4). In 2003 the reforms had not yet reached the majority of the HEI representatives responsible for implementing them. It was usually the heads of the institutions that were involved in the Bologna reforms, rather than the academic staff and students (EUA, 2003, p. 7). Two years later, however, many institutions have made great efforts to ‘internalise’ the reform process, incorporating Bologna issues into their own institutional strategies.
The Europeanisation of Higher Education in the Netherlands

and activities. ‘All actors in institutions are now facing and tackling the challenges of implementation with commitment and energy’ (EUA, 2005, p. 4).

Despite the active involvement of a great number of actors in the Bologna Process, implementation is often still being hindered by lack of the necessary institutional autonomy to make key decisions. Many HEI leaders find that national legislation undermines their autonomous decision-making powers (EUA, 2003, 2005). On the one hand, HEIs feel they are being pushed in a certain direction; on the other hand, they are responsible for all the extra costs that come with the reforms. ‘While many governments have made considerable progress with respect to the creation of legal frameworks which allow HEIs to implement Bologna reforms, only half of them seem to have provided some funding to HEIs for the reforms’ (EUA, 2003, p. 23). This means that the Bologna reforms are often implemented at the cost of other core functions or essential improvements. The Netherlands is one of the countries where HEIs have complained about a lack of financial means (EUA, 2003, pp. 23-24). In the current stage of the process, there is still a lack of additional financial resources for universities to cope with such a major restructuring exercise (EUA, 2005, p. 4).

Besides insufficient funds, there tends to be a gap between the formal legislation and the way HEIs adopted this legal framework. One-third of the HEIs had implemented a two-tier structure before the Bologna Process, while 21% have introduced it as a result of it. More than 36% intend to introduce it and 7.5% do not intend to adopt the new system at all (EUA, 2003, p. 48). These facts show that neither Bologna nor the national governments have managed to ensure compliance in the reform of their educational structures, posing a considerable obstacle to achieving convergence in European higher education. Furthermore, different interpretations of the reform process are not uncommon. The main cause of this problem is the confusion that exists regarding the objectives of the first-cycle degree. Furthermore, institutions and academics have not been given enough time to address reforms in a comprehensive way (EUA, 2005, p. 4).

Another obstacle to overall convergence is the fact that Bologna has had a particularly strong impact in countries where governments imposed a deadline for the compulsory introduction of the new system (the Netherlands, Norway, Italy), while HEIs do not feel the urge to shift to the new structures in countries where the introduction of reforms is still voluntary (Germany, Austria, Portugal, Spain). Furthermore, there is little Europe-wide agreement about the specific contents of the new BAMA system (EUA, 2003, pp. 49, 51). Although progression is being made, introducing a three-cycle system throughout Europe requires a complex cultural and social transformation of society. Furthermore, the introduction of BAMA has a different impact and significance in different countries (EUA, 2005, p. 4).

These examples highlight the difficulty of introducing educational reforms in a number of countries without legal enforcement from Brussels. The fact that educational policy still falls under the responsibility of the national governments implies that new regulations in this area will always be subject to different interpretations about how and when to apply the rules. Obviously, countries that have made the most progress in adopting the new system can be considered relatively compliant in the policy development and implementation process. In countries where HEIs are still awaiting detailed guidelines for implementation, the political decision-making process is still at an early stage.

This is a very general overview of how the Bologna Process is progressing. In order to achieve the goals, closer cooperation between ministries and HEIs is necessary. Governments should understand that changing legislation is not enough to achieve the desired results. Instead, institutions need to be granted more autonomy in order to carry out successful reform (EUA, 2005, p. 5). Furthermore, constant consultation between the Bologna countries is a prerequisite for achieving the common goals in the same way and within the same timeframe. This has been acknowledged in the Berlin Communiqué (19 September 2003), where all the countries have committed themselves to implement the BAMA structure before 2005 (Berlin Communiqué, 2003, p. 3).

Since education policy does not fall under the responsibility of the EU, it has not been possible to establish any strict European regulations concerning the Bologna objectives. The European Ministers of Education agreed on a general framework that forms the basis for educational reform, but the lack of a legal basis is the main obstacle to convergent policy making in education. The effect of the Bologna Agreement is therefore very different in the individual
countries. The next paragraph will further elaborate on the impact of the Bologna Agreement in the Netherlands, with special attention to the Bachelor-Master’s (BAMA) structure.

**Higher Education Policy in the Netherlands**

The Dutch higher education system is a binary system with *hogescholen* and universities. While the *hogescholen* are responsible for higher professional education, the university system focuses on academic teaching and research. The primary source of funding for HEIs is the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Sciences (ECS) (Luijten-Lub, 2004, p. 166).

The Dutch Ministry of ECS is primarily responsible for governmental policy for both higher education and scientific research (Luijten-Lub, 2004, p. 168). The Ministry publishes a Higher Education and Research Plan (HOOP) every four years. Obviously, there are more governmental actors involved in the policy-making process; the Education Council (Onderwijsraad) and the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy make recommendations to the Ministry. Furthermore, the Ministry consults several buffer organisations, such as the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU), the Association of Universities of Professional Education (HBO-Raad) and the National Student Union (LSVB) during the process (Luijten-Lub, 2004, p. 168).

As pointed out in the Bologna Declaration, the HEIs are considered autonomous actors. In order to ensure the Ministry’s authority in the BAMA process on the one hand, while giving significant freedom to HEIs on the other hand, the Ministry applies the philosophy of ‘steering at a distance’. The general aim of this approach is to decrease the regulatory command of government by granting the HEIs more responsibility and autonomy (Kickert, 1995, p. 142). However, the main problem with the HEIs having insufficient influence in decision making and receiving too little financial support (EUA, 2003, 2005) has still not been solved and reflects a gap in the policy process.

Although the HEIs are granted considerable freedom with regard to the implementation of BAMA, there are some general national guidelines in education policy which can be followed. The Bologna Survey showed that the Netherlands is one of those countries where the aim of attracting more foreign students is explicitly stated as national policy (Van der Wende, 2001, p. 437). This indicates the short-term economic rationale: attracting foreign (fee-paying) students in order to generate income for the HEIs. The long-term goal in economic terms is that the graduates can represent the Netherlands in future international business and trade relationships. Another long-term objective is that international students could make up for the shortage of students in certain fields, especially science and technology. Clearly, these economic rationales can be linked to the general trend of internationalisation in educational policy.

**BAMA Policy in the Netherlands**

In early 2002, the Dutch parliament approved the change in the Law on Higher Education and Research (WHW). From the academic year 2002/03 onwards, Dutch HEIs have been able to award Bachelor and Master’s degrees (Lub et al, 2003, p. 250). At the same time, a new law concerning the introduction of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was approved, replacing the national credit point system. The Dutch government accepts the introduction of the BAMA system as an essential condition for a modern and internationally oriented higher education system. The BAMA system is expected to make the Dutch higher education system more flexible and open, making it easier for Dutch students to study abroad as well as allowing foreign students to enter the Dutch system (Lub et al, 2003, p. 251).

While the universities are generally on track with their development of BAMA, the *hogescholen* find it more difficult to adjust their education system. Since the HEIs themselves are responsible for the implementation of the BAMA system, there exists great variation between and within them (Educational Inspection, 2003, p. 63). For example, some HEIs have a great influence over the process of innovation in curriculum, whereas others place this responsibility on the directors of the education programmes.

The introduction of BAMA has been a more radical process in the universities than in the *hogescholen*. While the complete university system and programmes needed to be revised, the *hogescholen* have only had to expand their education programmes (Van der Wende & Lub, 2001,
p. 4). Since the previous education system in the hogescholen was quite similar to a bachelor programme, the changes made were relatively limited. In university systems, however, the conversion of four-year programmes into three-year bachelor’s and one-year master’s has had a greater impact (Educational Inspection, 2003, p. 64).

Clearly, the process of policy development is different in both types of HEI with regard to involvement and contents. One of the reasons for this difference is the strong international orientation of the universities. While the universities consult and imitate the educational systems of their international partners, the hogescholen focus more on national legislation (Van der Wende & Lub, 2001, p. 4). Since this national legislation has only just been developed completely, the policy development within hogescholen continues slowly.

A final important note that indicates a difference between the two kinds of HEI is the fact that ‘post-initial’ hogeschool-master’s are currently not financed by the state.[1] Until these master’s programmes are accredited according to European accreditation rules and fulfil the policy rules that universities applied in composing their master’s programmes, hogeschool-master’s will not be publicly funded (Lower House Meeting, 30 October 2003, p. 6). In order to change this situation, hogescholen will have to make some effort. This may even mean closer cooperation with their partners on a national and international level.

**Interviews**

This section presents and discusses the visions of four people involved in the policy-making and implementation process of BAMA. While the Official in the Ministry (OM) and Policy Advisor (PA) at the VSNU (Association of Dutch Universities) are involved in developing BAMA policy, the BAMA Coordinator and Director of Studies (DOS) at the Faculty of Culture and Science Studies [2] coordinate the implementation of BAMA at the University of Maastricht.

**The Bologna Process**

All interviewees identified the Bologna Process as the most important impetus for the introduction of the BAMA model. Given the general aim – shared by both the Ministry and universities – to pursue changes in Dutch higher education, the Bologna Declaration came at the right time and fitted well into the developments that were already under way. The OM argued that ‘an important advantage of the Europeanisation of higher education systems is comparability of degrees’ (OM, 21-06-2004). However, the DOS expressed some criticism concerning this matter. He argued that:

Bologna mainly discusses the length of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, not so much the contents. Given the fact that Bologna only sets a minimum of three years for the bachelor programme and does not specify the length of the master’s programmes either, the choice of how to implement these rather vague regulations is up to the universities.

Furthermore, difference in quality in education will not be eliminated because of Bologna. (DOS, 23-06-2004)

Individual countries and universities have interpreted this part of the Bologna Declaration in their own way. Clearly, this has considerable consequences for the comparability of higher education in Europe. The DOS argued that ‘students who have obtained a three-year bachelor degree cannot be expected to have gained the same academic skills as students who have obtained a four year bachelor. However, according to Bologna both students have the same level’ (DOS, 23-06-2004). Both the BAMA Coordinator and the DOS argued that this is a very weak point in the Bologna Agreement: ‘Transparency and comparability of higher education can only be achieved by establishing strict rules, which are absent in the Bologna Declaration. In the current situation it is therefore impossible to compare bachelor’s and master’s programmes from different universities’ (DOS, 23-06-2004).
The Europeanisation of Dutch Higher Education

The DOS did not really recognise the advantage of a uniform European education system. Firstly, he argued that the objective of comparability of degrees and thus convergence of higher education has not yet been achieved. Secondly, the increase in mobility of students is unlikely to happen. In the previous system mobility was already taking place, since students already took up the opportunity of studying abroad. Increase in mobility will mostly depend on financial factors. The DOS gave the example of the Finnish government, which provides full funding for two-year master’s programmes. However, if a Dutch student decides to do a master’s programme in Finland, the Dutch government will only fund one year of the programme (DOS, 23-06-2004). This example shows that there are still many national differences that limit mobility in the area of European higher education, and Bologna cannot eliminate these differences.

Although national legislation seems to be a major obstacle to achieving Bologna objectives, the interviewees did not generally appreciate the extensive involvement of the EU in solving Bologna problems. The PA at the VSNU criticised EU involvement in the accreditation process:

The EU has presented certain rules concerning accreditation, which the Bologna countries should fulfil. Countries cannot apply for EU funding if they do not fulfil the rules. In my opinion, EU bureaucracy should be avoided as much as possible. Furthermore, European ministers should know where to stop ‘converging activities’. (PA, 21-06-2004)

He went on to point out that it is hard to maintain academic freedom in research if the EU tries to control too many aspects of the national education systems. For example, the EU tries to establish cooperation in education between member states. This can be considered to be a good development, since many new member states are lagging behind. On the other hand, most HEIs prefer finding their own partners (PA, 21-06-2004).

There are too many EU regulations and guidelines which member states have to follow and for which lobbying is essential (PA, 21-06-2004). The DOS was not in favour of too much European intervention either. He argued that it is relatively easy for the EU to impose regulations, whereas the HEIs have the task of implementing new legislation, which is a much harder job. Moreover, in most cases it is not advantageous to work according to many European rules. The vision of one Europe works well on paper, but it is hard to achieve this in reality (DOS, 23-06-2004).

Despite these criticisms of European intervention, it should be stressed that the interviewees agreed that the power concerning final decision making in education continues to reside with the national governments. These individual governments have created a ‘European basis’ by signing the Bologna Declaration. Although Bologna is supposed to reflect a European vision of higher education, the implementation of the agreement depends on the interpretations of the different HEIs.

The ‘converging’ policy-making process which starts at the European level (Bologna) is continued on the various national levels in the Bologna countries and continues through to interventions of the educational inspection and other controlling bodies on a decentralised level (universities). The level of convergence gradually decreases during this process as the national government develops a legal framework based on its interpretation of the Bologna Agreement, after which the HEIs are ‘free’ to further develop and implement this framework. It can thus be argued that the path in this policy-making process forms a barrier to the achievement of convergence in European higher educational policy. Therefore, the objective of pursuing European policy in an area where the EU does not have the power to impose strict rules may be questioned.

The BAMA Policy-making Process

Besides the OM, all the interviewees agreed that there was little clarity about the conditions concerning BAMA introduction. BAMA legislation was not approved by the Upper Chamber until June 2002. In August 2002, the introduction of BAMA was announced in official state documents (Staatscourant), after which the HEIs were supposed to start the new system from September 2002 onwards (PA, 21-06-2004). Obviously, this left little time to clarify things. The HEIs often found it difficult to act upon guidelines set out by the Ministry. Overall, there was little central guidance during the introduction process (DOS, 23-06-2004).
Some HEIs started to change their traditional educational structures into BAMA before the official legislation was announced. They chose to do so in order to be well prepared for the official introduction of BAMA from September 2002 onwards (PA, 21-06-2004). HEIs had already acknowledged that their existing educational structures were obsolete and were thus in need of revision. In order to increase international recognition of their education, they were eager to reformulate their programmes, even though ‘creating one European dimension in higher education’ was not yet one of the aims that HEIs wished to realise (PA, 21-06-2004).

Both the DOS and the BAMA Coordinator agreed that the Ministry has not developed BAMA policy in the best possible way. Reforming four-year education programmes into three-year bachelor’s and one-year master’s (three plus one BAMA) was very difficult and the DOS argued that this reform has not led to a major improvement in higher education. The main problem lies in the fact that the previous system required students to study for at least four years, whereas the current system obliges students to attend university for a minimum of only three years. Only a proportion of the students will choose to study for a master’s degree. The way the Ministry introduced BAMA policy will lead to a smaller demand for education, which can be considered a ‘concealed cutback in higher education expenditure’ (DOS, 23-06-2004). While the Ministry used to provide funding for four years of study, in many cases it will now only finance three years. However, this will depend on the student’s choice as to whether he/she will proceed to a master’s programme. Students who choose to stay at university for four years will receive four years of funding.

Although the introduction of BAMA has had a considerable impact on universities’ curricula, the scope of funding has not changed. According to the DOS the decision to develop BAMA policy precisely according to the minimum standards of Bologna reflects the objective of cutting costs (DOS, 23-06-2004). Despite lobbying activities from both the VSNU and HEIs (BAMA Coordinator, 23-06-2004), the Ministry did not introduce a three-plus-two or four-plus-one BAMA system. Furthermore, universities have explicitly asked the Ministry to provide a steering mechanism that could convince students to consider both a bachelor and master’s. This did not happen. In the current situation, BAMA will not have a very positive influence on the Dutch knowledge economy (DOS, 23-06-2004).

The OM and PA were both quite positive about the cooperation between the VSNU and the Ministry during the BAMA policy-making process. Generally, the Ministry appreciates involvement of the VSNU and some of their recommendations and ideas have been integrated in the BAMA policy. However, the PA at the VSNU recognised one major problem in this process. Since Dutch master’s programmes are worth 60 ects [3], they are not comparable with most European master’s programmes, which are worth 90 ects. In most cases, the Dutch Ministry refuses to provide funding for the extra 30 ects, which has negative consequences for the competitive position of Dutch higher education abroad (PA, 21-06-2004). However, the OM argued that the Ministry sometimes considers extending master’s programmes’ funding. In cases where the quality of a programme is relatively low and therefore has a negative effect on the international comparability of the programme, the Ministry is willing to discuss extension of the programme’s duration and funding.[4] So far, this method has established around 90 research master’s with a two-year duration period (OM, 22-03-2005).

Although this is a good development, most master’s programmes are still only worth 60 ects. By imposing a tariff of 60 ects master’s programmes, the Ministry does not give universities the choice to develop master’s that are comparable and competitive with other European master’s programmes (BAMA Coordinator, 23-06-2004). Clearly, the Ministry did not consider the influence that their decision would have on the international competitiveness of Dutch master’s programmes. When students have to choose between a 60 ects and a 90 ects master’s, they will most likely choose the latter, since this programme will provide them with more knowledge (DOS, 23-06-2004).

Furthermore, if students in countries like Finland receive funding for two-year master’s programmes, it is very unlikely that they will choose to do a 60 ects master’s in the Netherlands. Currently, most Dutch master’s programmes form an exception at a European level, and Dutch universities cannot apply for EU funding, since 60 ects master’s programmes do not meet European conditions (BAMA Coordinator, 23-06-2004). This situation has led to friction between the universities and VSNU on the one hand and the Ministry on the other hand. And again, the main
cause of the friction is lack of financial means, which clearly limits the power of the universities to a considerable extent.

Competition is all about trying to get the best professors and students. This requires sufficient financial resources. In the Netherlands especially, universities cannot count on much support from the Ministry on this matter. Cutting costs in higher education is continuing and seems set to remain policy (Müller, 22-06-2004, p. 6). More money is still needed for offering excellent quality in education. Increasing quality leads to a better competitive position of education abroad, making it easier to attract the best (foreign) students.

According to the DOS, the competitive position of Dutch higher education has not changed as a result of BAMA. Dutch universities are still not able to compete with renowned universities such as Harvard or Yale, since more financial means are required for increasing competitiveness (DOS, 23-06-2004). This problem was previously noted in the Trends III Report, and applies to most Bologna countries. Lack of financial means can be considered a very important weakness of the Bologna Declaration and reflects an essential problem: Bologna is an agreement, not legislation. Since there is no European higher education policy, European agreements may need to be based on stricter frameworks, leaving less room for national interpretations.

Despite their criticism of the way the Ministry developed BAMA policy, the interviewees did not oppose the introduction of BAMA. Most universities supported the ideas of the Bologna Declaration, but disagreed with the way the Ministry developed BAMA policy. The PA at the VSNU and the DOS were positive about the introduction of BAMA in Dutch universities. The DOS admitted that the strict structure of a three-year bachelor’s programme has led to a smaller dropout of students, which will probably increase study output (DOS, 23-06-2004). Moreover, the real results will only become clear after a few more years. The first general BAMA-evaluation will take place in 2007 (OM, 21-06-2004). Until then, BAMA policy will continue to be shaped by policymakers and advisers at national and decentralised levels.

**Conclusion**

Although the EU lacks the direct policy instruments to impose regulations in the area of higher education, countries show a great commitment to agreements such as Bologna to implement European policy guidelines in their national higher education policies. Especially in recent years, the programmes and guidelines that have been implemented at the European level reflect consensus of thought on education (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 133).

It can be concluded that the Europeanisation of Dutch higher education policy is in process. The Bologna Agreement has played a significant role in this, as it is the first agreement that has been able to enhance the European dimension in higher education policy (Van der Wende, 2001, p. 431). However, the increasing willingness to cooperate does not imply that countries aim to achieve homogenisation of higher education systems. The fact that countries are incorporating the same guidelines and discourses presented merely shows that this is the only way to overcome educational and social difficulties (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 133).

As expressed by most interviewees, the advantage of a uniform European education system is not really recognised. Introducing the Bologna Agreement – and the BAMA policy in particular – is considered an effective and inexpensive way to revise the Dutch higher education system (DOS, 23-06-2004). Furthermore, the strength of the Bologna Agreement lies in the fact that countries are afraid of being left out, which makes them very committed to implementing it. It can thus be argued that countries adopt European programmes because it is the most effective way to respond to the challenges of globalisation and they may have as little as no commitment to the Europeanisation of their higher education systems.

On the one hand, Bologna has enhanced the European dimension in higher education, since it demonstrates that 40 countries recognise the importance of increasing cooperation on a European level. On the other hand, however, it has failed to achieve a uniform European system or a European space of higher education, as convergence in higher education policies is limited by a lack of strict rules and capacity to enforce them. This has particularly become clear with regard to Dutch BAMA policy.
It can be argued that while Europeanisation does represent a new set of rules, there is no reason to expect all countries to interpret those rules in identical ways, or to expect them to play the rules in identical ways (Dale, 1999, p. 2). Since countries are given the freedom to decide for themselves what kind of BAMA system they introduce (with a minimum of a three-plus-one year system), there is now a significant diversity in both content and form of BAMA systems throughout Europe. This makes it difficult to increase transparency and comparability of degrees, as well as to create convergence in European higher education systems (DOS, 23-06-2004). Clearly, a lack of strict rules limits the presence of Europeanisation in higher education policy. However, the implementation of the Bologna Agreement is still progressing and it is essential to stress that educational reform takes time.

In conclusion, it can therefore be argued that the Europeanisation of higher education policy is being shaped in the context of the following contradiction: while education remains an exclusive matter for each member state, politicians will continue to adopt common programmes and policies in order to increase their competitive position in the higher education market (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 133). In line with this final statement, it can be argued that Europe functions like a regulatory ideal that tends to influence national policies, but in the process of Europeanisation, the member states and their representatives remain the most powerful actors (Nóvoa, 2002, p. 133).

Notes
[1] The Ministry does finance ‘initial’ hogeschool-master’s. These refer to master’s programmes for which the Ministry recognises a special need. Master’s in Nursing are an example of funded hogeschool-master’s.
[2] In order to ensure anonymity of the interviewees, they will be referred to by their job titles.
[3] Ects: European Credit Transfer System. This name refers to the credit that has been introduced at the European level.
[4] The official body NVAO (Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie) tests whether or not the time and funding of a master’s programme will be extended.

References
Judith Litjens


Lower House Meeting (30 October 2003) Invoering van de bachelor-master structuur in het Hoger Onderwijs. Available at: http://parlando.sdu.nl/cgi/login/anonymous


APPENDIX

Further Details of Interviewees

   One of the policy-makers involved in the BAMA process.

2. Policy Advisor at the VSNU (Association of Dutch Universities) in Utrecht
   The VSNU is the organisation where Dutch universities develop policy guidelines for higher education. The PA follows activities of universities up close, lobbies with the Ministry and forms part of the Bologna Promotion Team, which is established in order to ‘translate’ European and national policy objectives to the universities.

3. BAMA coordinator at the University of Maastricht.
   She is responsible for the smooth implementation of the BAMA framework – as established by the Ministry – in the different faculties.

4. Director of Studies BA Arts and Culture, MA Arts and Heritage/Policy, Management and Education at the Faculty of Culture and Science Studies, University of Maastricht.
   The DOS is responsible for the implementation of BAMA legislation in the curriculum of this faculty.

JUDITH LITJENS is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity (CREID), University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom. The Centre aims to undertake high quality research to inform policy and practice geared towards the pursuit of equality, social justice and social inclusion for a wide range of disadvantaged groups. Her research interests are: European influences in higher education; policy-making in higher education; lifelong learning policies; and Scottish education policy. Correspondence: Judith Litjens, Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity (CREID), Moray House School of Education, University of Edinburgh, Holyrood Road, Edinburgh EH8 8AQ, United Kingdom (judith.litjens@ed.ac.uk).