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Vojin Rakic

University of Belgrade

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Evolutionary Theory Applied to Institutions The Impact of Europeanization on Higher Education Policies

Vojin Rakic

The Problem and a Tentative Theoretical Model

What was the impact of European integration on higher education policies of its member states and the subsequent adoption of the Sorbonne Declaration (1998) and Bologna Declaration (1999)¹? To answer this question I will focus on six states of the European Union: Germany, the Netherlands and Belgium/Flanders², Great Britain, Sweden and Finland. The selection of these six cases is based on the fact that they represent states that are culturally related, but that enclose both the founding members of the European Community, as well as “newcomers” to the European union of states. Hence, the higher education policies of the selected cases:

- were not isolated from each other;
- contained similarities that might not only be attributed to their membership in the European Community/Union, but possibly also to other mechanisms that resulted in a convergence of their higher education policies.

An attempt will be made to assess whether the higher education policies in these six countries were converging, diverging or not changing at all – before the signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declaration. After proposing an answer to this question, I will deal with the issue whether change (convergence or divergence) or its absence was a consequence of EU policies or of other circumstances. First, however, the concepts of convergence/divergence (homogeneity/diversity) in higher education will be discussed. Borrowing from evolutionary theory, I will attempt to prove that institutional imitation, rather than EU policies, was a primary mechanism responsible for observed convergence of higher education policies of

1 The expressions “European integration” and “Europeanization” I understand as coterminous. They refer to wider integration processes than those that are merely a direct result of European Union policies.

2 After the federalization of Belgium in 1989, higher education policies were almost completely transferred to the regional level and the level of the language communities. I will concentrate on the higher education system in Flanders, treating it as a part of the Belgian system before 1989.