

INTERNATIONAL CONVERGENCE IN POLICY AND PRACTICE: TRANSNATIONAL DIFFUSION AND ADOPTION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Paper for the ANZCIES Conference “Questioning ‘Best Practice’ in Education: Benefits and Disadvantages, Debates and Dilemmas”
Coffs Harbour 2-4 December 2005.

DRAFT. PLEASE DO NOT CITE!

Abstract

Governments, schools or universities should indeed critically question best practices before adopting them. But do they? Or do best practices gradually spread out as taken for granted templates and models or ‘ritual myths’ for policy makers in other countries. In the case of higher education, the transnational diffusion of ideas, policies and practices is especially common because of its international character. This exploratory paper will survey the mechanisms through which discourses and policies spread throughout the world and the extent to which they lead to international isomorphism and convergence. It is argued that this diffusion cannot only be explained by functional claims of effectiveness and efficiency. Explanations arising from sociologically inspired neo-institutional theories provide alternative or complementary explanations for the convergence of discourses and policies. In the paper a distinction is made between four explanations: imposition, harmonisation, imitation and professional socialisation. While sociological institutionalism predicts convergence, historical institutionalism makes a case for the persistence of national differences, rejecting the thesis of cross-national convergence. To bring together these seemingly contrasting views, it is useful to take a closer look at what the meanings of convergence and isomorphism are, through what mechanisms they come about and to look at the extent to which convergence can actually be observed. The latter is done by looking at developments in higher education and research policies in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION: INTERNATIONALISATION OF DOMESTIC POLICIES

Domestic politics and policy making is generally analysed in a domestic context, looking at national processes and national power constellations contextualised by national cultures, national laws and national norms. The globalisation thesis claims that institutional arrangements that were previously considered national become to some extent disembedded from this national context and re-embedded in sub-national, supranational or a-territorial contexts (Beerens, 2003). This is also the case for policies that are usually considered to be located exclusively in the national domain, such as education policies, health care policies and social policies. The fact that they are considered exclusively national, has led to 'methodological nationalism' or 'methodological territorialism' in many social sciences. Here, social arrangements such as society, culture, law, polity, etc. are implicitly equated with national society, national culture, national law and national polity. Obviously, the national character of such arrangements is still very much present and often dominant. To create a full picture however, it is necessary to address international and transnational influences on domestic policies.

Of course, nation states have never been fully autarchic and have always been exposed to influences from outside. However, through the increasing massification and acceleration of flows of people, money, images and ideas and because of the disembedding or globalisation of other sectors of society (e.g. economic trade, media), previous domestic issues have gained an international and/or transnational character. This can be the case because a particular policy sector has gained an international dimension and therefore needs some kind of international coordination. With the increase in international mobility of students for instance, there emerged a need for agreements on recognition of degrees or credits. But also the free movement of labour and the liberalisation of trade in services needed coordination on professional qualifications, for instance in the field of medicine or law. Once a regional (in the meaning of a collection of nations) or a world polity emerges in a specific domain, international organisations and transnational actors can step into or be drawn into domestic policy processes. Formal international organisations such as development banks or the International Monetary Fund step into domestic affairs in many developing countries; transnational organisations like Greenpeace or Amnesty are drawn into national politics by local organisations; multinational corporations exert influence on national environmental or labour policies. But also local policy actors themselves are exposed to more and more external ideas through new technologies, internationalised education, increased travel opportunities, international workshops, seminars and conferences, etc. In such cases there are obvious international influences, even though authority is still fully located in national domains.

Because of these international influences in national policy domains it is plausible to assume that national differences are to some extent disappearing and that more and more similarity will occur between countries. If organisations are believed to respond similarly to similar environmental pressures, the globalisation thesis predicts an increased level of convergence because institutional environments have globalised and denationalised to some extent as well (see the work on the world society or world polity approach, e.g. Meyer et. al., 1997; Drori et. al., 2003). This line of thinking resembles the isomorphism thesis that is frequently posited in neo-institutional theories of organisational behaviour and that predicts organisations to become more alike through coercive, mimetic and normative pressures within organisational fields (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). This

argument is apparent in the sociological version of new institutionalism (see Hall and Taylor, 1996). Sociological institutionalism seeks an explanation for the observation that organisations take on specific forms, procedures and symbols and analyses how such practices are diffused through organisational fields or across nations. The adoption of such forms, procedures or symbols is not so much a matter of proved efficiency but is more related to expected social appropriateness or normative legitimacy.

Another argument, also based on neo-institutional thinking, is that institutions are durable. According to historical institutionalism, international influences might appear to be implemented similarly on the surface, in practice the historically grown national peculiarities and balances of power will cause divergent practices and results through path-dependency. This historical strand in the new institutionalism rejects the postulate that the same operative forces will generate the same results everywhere in favour of the view that the effect of such forces will be mediated by the contextual features of a given situation inherited from the past (Hall and Taylor, 1996). Institutions – defined as procedures, routines, norms and conventions embodied in the organisational structure of the polity – are seen as relatively persistent features of the historical landscape and therewith sustain the durable differences between institutional contexts. Embeddedness theories (see Dacin et al., 1999 for an overview) reflect this view and see relationships between organisations embedded within a broader set of socio-cultural forces that shape the nature of collective activity, individual organisational action and opportunities and constraints.

While on the one hand neo-institutionalism makes a case for cross-national convergence and international isomorphism, on the other hand it makes a case for persistent national differences. To bring together these seemingly contrasting views, it is useful to take a closer look at what the meanings of convergence and isomorphism are. This will be done in the next section where different stages in the process of convergence are identified. Next, the various mechanisms will be explored through which international influences spread and convergence comes about. In the final section the focus is on how international influences are incorporated into domestic policies and on the extent to which convergence can actually be observed. This will be investigated by looking at discourses and policies in three countries in the ASEAN region: Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. These case studies are meant to illustrate the points made in the conceptual parts of the paper.

ISOMORPHISM AND POLICY CONVERGENCE

Isomorphism and convergence are frequently used interchangeably. Convergence can be defined as the tendency of societies to grow more alike, to develop similarities in structures, processes and performances (Kerr, 1983: 3). Isomorphism is defined as a process of homogenization that ‘forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions’ (DiMaggio and Powell 1991: 66). While isomorphism seems to be looking more at shapes and structures, convergence tends to emphasise political and societal directions. Instead of organisational isomorphism within organisational fields, convergence studies focus more on (the growing) isomorphism among nations. It looks at pressures that provide a tendency for government structures and policies in different countries to become more alike. To see to what extent convergence or isomorphism can be observed, it is useful to distinguish between four different stages of convergence, as identified by Pollitt (2002: 477-478). Convergence starts with *discursive convergence*. In this stage, ‘everybody’ starts talking about similar concepts and a particular idea becomes part of

the general discourse. For example, the idea of the knowledge society and the way scientific and technological innovation and higher education promotes economic development has pretty much become a global idea or a global discourse. Even the assumption that this demands greater interaction between university and industry, strategies for life long learning, or certain regulatory policies for IPR and patents, have become very broadly accepted, or at least they have become widely adopted in the global discourse. In the stage of *decisional convergence* – governments and other authorities publicly decide to adopt a particular organizational form or technique. In our case this means that policies and strategies are developed for (for instance) life long learning or university industry interactions. Although such decisions might be less wide spread than the discourse about them, the development of governmental actions and university policies on these issues can be observed in many countries across the globe, in developed as well as developing countries. Next, a stage of *practical convergence* can occur in which public sector organisations – such as ministries or (public) universities – start to work in similar ways, for instance when universities are all setting up technology transfer offices or creating professional development programmes. A final phase of *results convergence* arrives when reforms produce their intended (and unintended effects) so that the outputs and outcomes of public sector activity begin to converge, or in other words, when interaction between university and industry actually produces results and when professionals actually finish training programmes. The literature on the convergence of administrative reform and the adoption of new public management practices, point to the conclusion that there is a descending level of convergence going from discourse to decisions to practices and finally to results. Convergence in ‘talk’ is clearly apparent; convergence in decisions can also be identified across many countries. Convergence in practices and results however are harder to look into, but are less likely to occur (Pollitt, 2001, 2002).

Arguments for convergence and diffusion are often globally deterministic or functionalistic. Perceiving globalisation as an inevitable structural force in higher education is not a fruitful approach and hence agency and choice need to be brought back into the analysis (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). Functional explanations based on rational choice can be brought forward to account for convergence. Here convergence is seen as a result of imperatives for efficiency and effectiveness. These functional theories can be critiqued in two ways. First of all, functional theories would only explain convergence in all of the four stages. It is clear that this cannot be supported by studies on government reforms (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000) policy change (see Heichel et al., 2005 for an overview) or organisational reforms (Guler et al., 2002; Polillo & Guillen, 2005). Second, the question remains whether the reforms actually are more efficient or effective. Many reforms in public administration cannot unambiguously be supported by empirical evidence. The same thing is the case for instance for the relation between higher education and economic development (e.g. Wolf, 2002) and science and economic development (Drori et al., 2003). This at least points to the conclusion that specific reforms do not work everywhere all of the time. This paper already hinted at the suggestion that other imperatives than functional imperatives are at work in the international and transnational domains. Institutional theories and constructivist approaches provide additional answers to the question of how international influences enter domestic politics without falling into the trap of the structural bias or global determinism.

Mechanisms at work

Both the organisational literature on isomorphism and the political science literature on policy convergence present starting points for analysing the mechanisms through which discourses, decisions, practices and results are diffused among nations or organisations. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identify mechanisms that promote the copying of organisational forms but go beyond the rational search for superior performance. While acknowledging that it is an analytical distinction and that the three types intermingle, they distinguish between coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism. In the first case, isomorphism results from both formal and informal pressures, ranging from governmental mandates to cultural expectations. The pressure to adopt a specific measure comes from other organisations that can exercise some form of authority over the focal organisation. Mimetic isomorphism often stems from uncertainty or ambiguity, leading to organisations modelling themselves after other organisations. Normative isomorphism results from processes of professionalisation for instance via education and training and by way of interaction in professional associations and networks. Convergence then occurs because organisations are coerced to model themselves after other organisations, or because it is a risk-avoiding strategy to follow the leaders or because they are heavily influenced by norms in the sector.

Convergence is a term that is more frequently used in political science, public policy or macro-sociological studies. On the basis of a review of the comparative policy literature, Bennett (1991: 251) identifies four mechanisms through which policy convergence occurs: emulation, where state officials copy actions taken elsewhere; elite networking, where convergence results from transnational policy communities; harmonisation through international regimes; and penetration by external actors and interests. Another body of literature in policy studies talks about policy transfer. Dolowitz and Marsh (2000: 5) define policy transfer as a “process in which knowledge about policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in one political setting (past or present) is used in the development of policies, administrative arrangements, institutions and ideas in another political setting”. Processes of globalisation act as a facilitator of policy transfer, but at the same time, policy transfer can be seen as a driver of globalisation and cross-national convergence. Stone (2003: 3) suggests that the future prospects for policy transfer are heightened by tendencies towards regionalisation, growing integration of activities among international organizations and by the construction of new venues of global governance.

Policy transfer is basically seen as an action oriented intentional activity. In their review of the policy transfer literature, Dolowitz and Marsh (1996) distinguish between voluntary and direct and indirect coercive transfer. Direct coercive transfer takes place when one country or a transnational actor forces another government to adopt a policy. Direct coercive transfer from country to country is rare, but coercive force by supranational institutions or transnational organisations is more common. Indirect coercive transfer is related to the potential role of externalities or functional interdependence. This type of transfer finds its theoretical foundation in neo-functional perspectives on regional integration (Haas, 1958; Lindberg, 1963). This relates to a concept that in studies on European integration is often termed ‘functional spill-overs’, or the ‘expansive logic of sector integration’ (Haas, 1958: 243): developments in one sector (e.g. liberalisation of markets) will have a continued effect on policies on other sectors (e.g. higher education; see Beerkens, 2005). Although Dolowitz and Marsh talk about voluntary and coercive transfer, what they actually

refer to is voluntary or coercive adoption or the question whether the adopter has a (reasonable) choice in whether to adopt the policy changes or new ideas in question or not. In case of coercive adoption it is clear that an adopter would comply because of coercive pressures, namely because defiance will have serious negative (financial or reputational) consequences. Dolowitz and Marsh do not make a further distinction in different types of voluntary transfer or adoption. In the case of voluntary adoption, one could perceive the voluntary inclusion of new ideas or policies – and therewith the tendency towards convergence – either as a result of professional socialisation and elite networking or as emulation as reaction to uncertainty. Or, in the terminology used by DiMaggio and Powell (1983): it can stem from normative pressures or mimetic processes. These views on cross-national and cross-organisational diffusion share very similar characteristics and (even though they might emphasise agency or structure to different extents) provide a basis for exploring the mechanisms at work in the internationalisation of domestic policies. Until now, we have talked most about policy convergence, isomorphism and policy transfer. Convergence and isomorphism are analytically focused on *effects*, which can be either convergence or divergence (or a status quo) or isomorphism or heteromorphism. Policy transfer and policy diffusion on the other hand focus on the *processes* instead of the effects (Knill, 2005). While policy transfer is about an action oriented intentional activity, policy diffusion is characterised by uncoordinated interdependence (Elkins and Simmons, 2005).

The mechanisms that we will explore here are mechanisms that can be both action oriented and uncoordinated, and either intentional or unintentional. The physical meaning of diffusion – the intermingling of particles of two substances – implies that the originally foreign or international policies become mixed with domestic ‘substances’, and thereby implicitly recognises the possibility of divergence in latter stages (mainly practices and results). The literature addressed above provides us basically with four types of diffusion mechanisms: harmonisation; imposition through coercion; mimicry as a reaction to uncertainty and limited information; and normative socialisation through professional networking.

In the case of harmonisation, authority over a specific domain has shifted upwards to a supranational body or an international agreement. The adopter has committed itself to this body or agreement and is now forced to act according to the covenant, contract or treaty. In other cases, the fact that a group of countries have harmonised their policies indirectly coerces some other countries to follow so they will not be left behind. Adoption through harmonisation commonly arises out of externalities and spill-overs. In reaction to the externalities of increased cross-border flows, governments and organisations tend to cooperate and negotiate measures to control the negative effects of such externalities (e.g. environmental measures, consumer protection) or install measures to facilitate those flows (trade agreements, quality assurance of transnational education). Governments and organisations can take such measures also unilaterally. However, since they face similar transnational problems (especially in integrated regions like the EU) or externalities, responses can become rather standardised in time. This is for instance the case with regional trade agreements for regulating the transnational movement of goods and services. Although there are functional explanations for this (e.g. efficiency through standardisation), there are also coercive forces at work, mainly through ‘the fear of being left behind’. The fear of being left behind more or less compels countries or organisations to adopt specific policies, even when formal authority is not transferred to supranational bodies. Formal authority and therefore also agency and choice is

transferred by national governments themselves and now those governments have to live up to their promises and live with the externalities and spill-overs that these agreements bring along.

In the case of direct imposition, countries and organisation are coerced by foreign states, transnational actors or international organisations to comply with the measures that are imposed by them. Imposition refers to constellations where countries or international organizations force other countries to adopt certain policies by exploiting asymmetries in political or economic power (Knill, 2005). Here it is not so much the control or facilitation of flows that motivates convergence, but the power inequalities between transmitter and adopter. It thus can concern issues that have no international or transnational character at all. In some cases this coercion comes about through legal enforcement but it is mainly motivated by power differences. Cross-national imposition, like was the case in colonial relations, is not very common. The most apparent examples nowadays are the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and several EU institutions. Coercion can however also come from non-governmental transnational actors like multinational corporations or advocacy organisations. They will put pressure on national governments in order to lower their taxes or improve their human rights standards. Governments are likely to incorporate some of these pressures in order to maintain their competitiveness or to avoid 'naming and shaming'. In the case of imposition it is likely that 'talk' is formalised into real decisions. However, these decisions might be merely symbolic if no action is taken to implement such decisions.

Mimicry or imitation is a mechanism used by the adopting states or organisations in cases of uncertainty about which direction to go or ambiguity about means-end relationships. In such cases it can prove useful to look at similar countries or organisations and copy their solutions to specific problems. Comparative analysis, benchmarking and the use of indicators all facilitate this project of copying. It is not always the case that one country or organisation will copy exactly what another does. Richard Rose (1993: 30-32) identified five alternative ways in which recipients draw lessons from foreign programmes, policies or ideas. The simplest way is to *copy* a programme. This will be difficult if it occurs across borders. The differences in institutional structures (legal system, political system, culture, etc.) will make the implementation of an exact copy of programmes or policies nearly impossible, especially when policies are transferred from a very dissimilar country or region. What will be likely to happen in those cases is that policies will be adjusted for contextual differences. Here we can talk about adaptation. *Adaptation* rejects copying every detail of a policy and indicates that some parts will be adapted to local circumstances. Making a *hybrid* combines recognisable elements of policies from two different countries or transnational actors. A *synthesis* combines elements familiar in different programmes into a distinctive and fresh whole. A final way is *inspiration*, where the examination of programmes elsewhere can be a source of inspiration instead of analysis. These various forms can be seen as a continuum between passive mimicry on the one end and policy learning on the other. Such mechanisms are driven by international and inter-organisational competition: countries and organisations copy successful behaviour and structures in order to come to par with the leaders in their field. The concept of modelling – used by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) – is illustrative in this respect, also for the case of higher education. Universities tend to model themselves after 'big brands' like Harvard, Stanford, MIT or Oxford or Cambridge. Or they want to create their own 'Silicon Valley' or 'Route 128'. This type of mechanism consists of a conscious and explicit reference to models found in

other countries, unlike the next mechanism, which is a more covert form of diffusion. In the case of imitation 'talk' or 'discourse' play a very important role. Foreign examples can be used in different ways. They can be used as a real example after which to model domestic policies or structures, but on the other hand they can be part of a discourse and might merely function as an indication of which direction to go.

The final mechanism at work in the internationalisation of domestic policies is the diffusion of ideas and norms through professional socialisation and elite networking. This mechanism is at the same time the hardest to define since it concerns a wide range of processes, which are hard to observe directly. DiMaggio and Powel (1983) for instance point to the effect of education and training on the professionalisation of organisational fields. The fact that many professionals have been educated in foreign countries – especially the elites of developing countries and East Asia – or have enjoyed training courses provided by international organisations or foreign (donor) countries, is likely to have stimulated the spread of specific professional norms, for instance in business and public administration. The membership of professionals in all kinds of international professional organisations, the fact that they are invited to attend international seminars and conferences, their exposure to professional information from just about everywhere, etc., are all likely to affect the frames of reference of these professionals. In addition to this cognitive effect, the increased interaction is also likely to lead to the diffusion of ideas about what's 'right' or 'wrong'. This diffusion of norms travels through similar channels: media such as the Internet, TV or radio, international professional relations and networks, training and education, conferences, etc. This type of diffusion is based on the assumption that professional rationality becomes socially constructed through ongoing – and increasing – interaction across borders. In this ongoing interaction it is determined what is right or wrong, what works and what doesn't. This is dependent on the extent of international professional socialisation on the one hand and the compatibility of these international professional norms with domestic norms and culture on the other. If a substantial part of the elite in the state apparatus of a developing country has enjoyed education in (for instance) the US, one might expect an Americanisation of domestic administration. If this is however incompatible with domestic norms and culture, it is unlikely that these reforms will surpass the stage of decisions and turn into real actions.

Agents at work

The internationalisation of domestic policies can thus take place through imposition, harmonisation, imitation and professional socialisation. Adopting countries or organisations adjust or revise their policies according to the wants and needs of their powerful peers, according to the requirements of the agreements that they negotiated, according to the models or best practices that they observe abroad, and according to the normative and cognitive frames of reference that have shaped the minds of their professionals. It is clear from this overview that different agents are at work in these different mechanisms. In the case of imposition the agents are *international or transnational organisations*. These can be international governmental organisations – sometimes with a supranational character, sometimes more loosely structured like 'the international community' –, multinational corporations, and in some cases also non governmental organisations (mostly in cases of 'soft' coercion and 'naming and shaming'). The UN Security Council, the IMF and the World Bank are the most obvious examples of imposition, but coercion can also be observed with other UN institutions. Coercive pressure from corporations can also force changes in domestic

policies, for instance in labour policies, tax policies or environmental regulations. NGO's can also put pressures on countries to change domestic policies, especially in normatively weighty fields like human rights or environmental protection.

In the case of harmonisation, the internationalisation of domestic policies is driven by transnational activity that in turn leads to inter-state negotiations and agreements. States negotiate new forms of coordination as a reaction to transnational activity. In this case, *transnational society* thus brings about the need for nation states to (jointly) regulate their activities.

Where international elements enter domestic politics through emulation and imitation, the *nation state or focal organisation* itself is the agent. It is the national government that decides to look abroad for templates, models or examples, and it is the national government that decides upon which templates, models or examples to use.

Finally, in the case of professional socialisation and elite networking, the international elements are brought in by those actors that are involved in these processes of socialisation and networking. Here, the matter of agency becomes a bit blurrier compared to the other types. International training, especially in universities, brings about processes of socialisation in an early stage. In later stages, the cognitive frames of domestic officials are exposed to international organisations, or loose coalitions like epistemic communities or transnational advocacy networks. Other important vehicles are professional organisations and associations as platforms where ideas are exchanged and where some of them are proclaimed best practice. Socialisation can come about in the form of asymmetric information exchange like in education, training, or capacity building programmes, some times it evolves in exchange within equal platforms like conferences, or printed and virtual media. In this type of diffusion, *transnational professional networks* can be seen as the drivers or agents in the internationalisation of domestic policies. Table 1 presents an overview of the four mechanisms and accompanying agents of diffusion.

Table 1: mechanisms and agents

Mechanisms of international diffusion	Agents of international diffusion
Penetration	International or transnational organisations
Harmonisation	Transnational society
Imitation	Nation State / Focal Organisation
Professional socialisation and elite networking	Transnational professional networks

ADOPTION PATTERNS: EXAMPLES FROM SOUTHEAST ASIA

The convergence of the discourse on a specific issue across nations does not automatically mean that decisions, practices and results connected with this discourse will be implemented in national policies or organisational strategies. The four stages that were identified clearly point to the possibility of 'loose coupling' between the stages. The notion of loose coupling (Weick, 1976) refers to the problematic relationship between policy and practice or in our case, between discourse, policy, practice and results. There are different dynamics at play in the transition to the different stages: the transition from discourse to policy or the *formalisation* stage, the

transition from policy to practice or the *implementation* stage, and the transition from practice to results or the *execution* stage.

In any of these stages the coupling between the stages can – and most probably will – be distorted to some extent. Since ideas are placed from one spatial (or temporal) context into another, subsequent stages will develop somewhat differently than in the context from where it was copied, advocated or learned. But adjustments are also deliberately made in order to enable a better fit with the specific circumstances of a country or institution. We will explore the way in which the process of adoption goes through these stages or in other words, how international influences are actively brought in domestic policies and how they interplay with local circumstances. We will do so by looking at the evolution of higher education policies in three Southeast Asian countries: Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. For these countries we will analyse what mechanisms and agents have been at work and how local circumstances have influenced the adoption of foreign elements in their domestic policies. These countries provide interesting examples for the framework illustrated above because they all have a history of international dependence through colonialism and are currently an integrated part of the global economy, while at the same time their history shows strong government intervention, not just in economic affairs but also in social, cultural and educational affairs. In these three cases, we will especially focus on the mechanisms of diffusion and on the convergence of discourses and policies. The analysis of the convergence of practices and results requires a more in-depth study and falls outside the scope of this paper but will be dealt with in the subsequent stages of the research project. The information on the three countries is mainly taken from a recent book on the development of Asian universities edited by Philip Altbach (2004).

Singapore

Singapore as a small island state that has been part of both the British Empire until 1957 and part of the Malaysian federation until 1965, is obviously not immune from external influences. Two different institutions have always dominated the higher education landscape in Singapore: the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Nanyang Technological University (NTU). The NUS emerged out of a merger between the Nanyang University and the University of Singapore. The latter was again an offshoot of the Singapore campus of the University Malaya. The NTU used to be the Nanyang Technological Institute, a part of the NUS that was created after the merger between NUS and the Nanyang University in 1981. This institute became the NTU after 1991.

These two universities have been expanding in their enrolments, especially after the 1980s. Since the Singaporean Government launched its ‘2nd industrial revolution’ campaign in 1979, focusing on high-tech industry, skill intensive jobs and a shift towards services, there emerged the need for NUS and NTU to train the human resources needed for these reforms. In this expansion of the Singaporean higher education sector, the national government led the way but it recurrently looked abroad – mainly the US – to learn from other countries and copy other models. It has organised a range of international panels where issues were discussed with experts and prominent academics from the US, Europe and Japan. These panels advised the Ministry of Education on curricula, development policies and strategies. Also, various local review committees visited overseas institutions as parts of their fact-finding missions before publishing their policy recommendations (Tan, 2004). In addition, universities have increased their research linkages and exchange agreements,

especially with North American universities. NUS and NTU have copied the modular systems from US institutions and they abandoned the British nomenclature system in favour of the American one. This focus on the US becomes also clear in the words of the prime minister in 1996, where he announced the intention to turn Singapore into the 'Boston of the East' with Harvard and MIT serving as models for NUS and NTU. This vision was later adjusted and the University of California system became the model for Singapore. In 2000, a new university entered the Singaporean market: the Singapore Management University. This was officially a private company but receives substantial government funding and is clearly 'expected' to serve the public interest. In this case the modelling on American institutions gained a very direct form. The university was explicitly modelled after the Wharton School of Business of the University of Pennsylvania with which it still has many research and education links as becomes clear from this excerpt of a 2004 brochure:

Wharton provides a tested model for curriculum design, helps develop an outstanding SMU faculty and conducts joint research. Other collaborations with Wharton include the Wharton-SMU Executive Programmes and the Wharton-SMU Conference Series, which bring Wharton's world-renowned faculty to Asia courtesy of SMU.

In addition to NUS, NTU and SMU, there are a range of private higher education institutions. Most of them have linked up with American, British or Australian universities that award the degrees for these institutions.

In 2002, Singapore announced its ambition to become an international education hub. For this to be realised, they envisaged a three tier structure of which the first consisted of branch campuses of world class universities, the second is formed by NUS, NTU and SMU and the third tier consists of private universities. The Economic Development Board was instructed to attract ten prestigious universities to set up branch campuses in Singapore by 2008. Established campuses by 2005 are from Johns Hopkins University, the University of Chicago, INSEAD, the Georgia Institute of Technology, the Technische Universiteit Eindhoven and the Shanghai Jiao Tong University. Recently the University of Warwick (UK) and the University of New South Wales (Australia) were invited by the Economic Development Board as the only two universities to set up full branch campuses in Singapore. The University of Warwick declined on October 18 because of financial reasons and because of possible restrictions to academic freedom.

With the increase in demand for higher education, there was also an increased demand for high quality academics. To keep up with growing student enrolments, many local staff were sponsored to do their postgraduate studies overseas, especially in the US. In addition, staff recruitment has internationalised as well with more and more staff coming from India and China. The international education hub strategy aims at a percentage of foreign students of 20%. There is a variety of rationales behind this objective. First of all, Singapore wants to expand its talent pool. Foreign students have to sign a bond to live and work in Singapore for at least three years upon graduation (Tan, 2004). Another reason is that foreign students are a source of income and Singapore wants to be a player in the international higher education market. More indirect effects are expected to come through the cultural interaction between domestic and foreign students and also through the future networks that are established.

The Singapore example is clearly an example where national governments are truly agents of globalisation. Although Singapore is a strictly controlled state, including the field of higher education, it is one of the most globalised countries of the world. The government clearly has extensive knowledge about what is going on in the world (and especially the US), and is choosing models for the Singaporean education system, Singaporean universities, Singaporean innovation systems, etc. However, it has recently also been witnessing the limits of this strategy. For the last few years the Singapore has placed more and more emphasis on creativity, entrepreneurialism and risk-taking. Even in this case they are looking abroad for examples on how to approve this culture of creativity and entrepreneurialism. On the other hand, especially if comparing it to other countries in the region, Singapore has showed remarkable success in establishing the highly skilled, technology dependent service economy that they envisaged in 1979. The Universities in the country have played a crucial role in this. The inter-national copying in Singapore sometimes can even be taken literally, as in the case of SMU being modelled after the Wharton School of Business. Various other features were also transferred from the US, like the credit system, the semester system and the nomenclature system.

Singapore has not witnessed any direct coercion or penetration from other countries or international organisations. Singapore has developed economically in such a way that there is not much interference from international organisations such as development banks or the IMF. Also regional organisations like the APEC or ASEAN have not had a direct effect on its policies. Indirect coercion through harmonisation is also not very apparent. Harmonisation often occurs together with regional integration but in the ASEAN region the process of regional integration is still in its early stages. On a global level however, Singapore in the future might have to adjust to international agreements such as the GATS.

The fourth mechanism – professional socialisation and elite networking – is clearly apparent in Singapore. Many of its staff has obtained their degrees outside Singapore after which they probably take back some (mainly American and British) idea about how academic work should be done and about how academic courses should be taught. Not only the academics but also policy makers are foreign trained to a large extent. In addition, policy makers and university managers have been involved in many consultations with foreign experts and ministers regularly travel abroad to learn from foreign examples (for instance the Minister of Education recent visit in October this year to the Research triangle in North Carolina). This also illustrates the fuzzy border between imitation and professional socialisation into global norms. Although Singapore is very much focused on US developments in fields of innovation and education, these developments seem to be leading their own life after a while. Although the Wharton school case is a clear example of imitation, the recent focus on issues like creativity and entrepreneurialism are not so much copied from other parts of the world but have become part of the ‘talk’ in many other countries and has mainly been fuelled by academic and popular media.

In general one can detect a strong and increasing influence from the US models in Singaporean higher education. This does not mean that local forces have not been important. Actually, Singapore has set up a very special model where it mixes a strong interventionist state with a strong interest in economic relevance. The strong role of the state in higher education is contradictory to the main role model of Singapore. Nevertheless it has copied and adapted in a very successful way in the last 20 or 30 years with a very distinct result in terms of the steering of higher education. Its main challenge in the short term however is to make the step from high tech and

advanced skills to innovation and entrepreneurialism, which might take a broader cultural change that cannot be copied.

Malaysia

Malaysia and Singapore have the same history prior to the secession of Singapore in 1965. Both had at that time one major institution: the University of Malaya, of which the Singapore campus became the University of Singapore. Malaysia has also been influenced by Islamic forms of education illustrated by the madrassa's that still play an important role. The modern history of Malaysian higher education can roughly be divided into three parts (Lee, 2004). These also mark the different interaction between international and domestic factors in higher education policies. The first phase, roughly from 1905 until 1969 is marked by the struggle for independence and the emergence of the first universities based on the British model. Both the NUS in Singapore and the Universiti Malaya celebrate their 100th anniversary this year (2005), both having their roots in the College of Medicine that was established in 1905. The Universiti Malaya campus in Kuala Lumpur exists since 1962.

1969, the year of the ethnic riots in Malaysia marked the start of the New Economic Policy and the ethnic quota for higher education. Under this regime, Malay (or the Bumiputras) received preferential treatment in order to mitigate the disparity between the relatively affluent Chinese (and to a lesser extent the Indian population) and the poorly educated Malay. The British model universities were seen as one of the institutions that had contributed to the imbalances in the country, ultimately sparking the riots. With this also came the transition from universities as relatively autonomous institutions to strong state control over higher education. This control came in the form of regulation and supervision, and also through funding which was almost exclusively from state sources. All this was laid down in the Universities and University Colleges Act of 1971. This Act stated that the government took full responsibility for staffing, content and governance. It also posed strong restrictions for students and faculty to become involved in political or union matters. The official language in the universities was changed to Bahasa Malay, a further measure to make the university contribute to national identity building. In the 1970s, four more universities were established in the regions outside Kuala Lumpur. The early eighties witnessed the establishment of two more universities. The Islamic university was established in 1983 and in 1984 the government established the Northern University (UUM), focusing mainly on management and IT. In this period the Ministry played a dominant role and had strict control over the programmes on offer. In order to avoid duplication, many of the newer universities were specialised in specific fields.

The third phase, commencing in the mid eighties, can best be characterised by the terms corporatisation and privatisation. Due to increased and geographically diversified demand for higher education, the government needed to call upon the private sector to respond to this demand. Most of the private universities established in this period were affiliated with private companies and in some cases with political parties. The role of the state changed in this phase but control remains tight. The National Council on Higher Education Act of 1996 marked the formal transition from state control to a more supervisory role. A closer look however reveals that the government keeps a firm grip on higher education especially in issues related to equity and access and to political activities. Also, tuition fees are still a government matter, administered through the NCHE. At the same time market activities and market like strategies like engaging in business ventures, setting up endowment funds and start-up companies are promoted by government. The rationale for such changes

is rather unclear. One rationale was to enable the universities to deal with less government funding, but these reductions have not yet been realised. The strategy seems to fit well in the Vision 2020, the basic Malaysian framework for becoming a knowledge based society in 2020. The strategies of the universities increasingly apply the market language in their plans: getting involved in consultancy, look for external research funding, franchising education, full-fee-paying foreign students, renting out university facilities, etc.

In terms of governance – which is based on the British universities – there are several shifts away from the Council. In the 1971 Act, this was basically from the Council to the Minister, while the 1996 Act shifted authority from the Council to a Board of Directors. In addition, the Academic Senate was reduced, implying a shift in power away from the academics and towards Vice Chancellors or Boards of Directors. Academics are more and more assessed on the basis of performance and work under ‘personal performance contracts’. There is also a limitation in terms of content, with academics being restricted in research on issues like ethnic conflict, local corruption and other politically sensitive issues and in expressing their views publicly on such issues. Lee (2003) illustrates this by stating that “the Malaysian government has used legislation to gag both the Don’s and the students from participation in shaping public discourse and National debate”.

In the educational structures there has been a strong American influence: shift to credit systems, semesters, GPA’s, assessment methodologies, establishment of Graduate Schools, the introduction of coursework in postgraduate programmes. 1996 also saw the introduction of the National Accreditation Board (LAN) which ensured minimum standards and permitted private universities to award degrees. In 2001, a Quality Assurance Division was introduced for the public sectors, leading to the introduction of a wide range of business practices such as ISO and Benchmarking.

Malaysia has in time evolved into a system that incorporates influences from various places and mixes them with a very distinct Malaysian way. The most obvious features however are derived from the British and American systems combined with various typical Malaysian features. Except from the British colonial rule there are no direct coercive mechanisms at work in Malaysian higher education. This is partly because the country has done relatively well economically and has not been very dependent on international organisations and donors. Furthermore it has, through Mohammad Mahatir’s political attitude, always showed a strong resistance against western interference.

In terms of indirect coercive mechanisms, the influences of increasing transnational activity on Malaysian higher education do not seem to be substantial. The permission of Malaysia for higher education institutions abroad to set up branch campuses has had no directly observable spill-over effects on for instance the ethnic quota. The future engagement in GATS might put pressure on the Malaysian government to abolish preferential treatment. Lee (2004: 243) claims that GATS and the aspiration of Malaysia to become a regional education hub will force the Malaysian government to review many of its education policies.

The Malaysian government seems to have mainly looked at the United States and its universities as a model for the reforms in the 1990s. There is clearly a move towards more entrepreneurialism, at least in the discourse. Universities need to set up endowment funds, interact more with industry, find more external funding sources, etc. It is however hard to assess the extent to which such changes have actually been

implemented and what their effects are. Many of the changes in discourse are related to Malaysia's 2020 Vision. The Multimedia Super Corridor with an important role for the Multimedia University and Cyberjaya, the new high tech location of government seem not to produce the effects that were planned.

Norm socialisation through elite networking is also not very apparent. Many of Malaysia's academics and policy makers have enjoyed their higher education outside Malaysia, mainly in the US, the UK and Australia, but on first sight the effect of this seems to be less obvious than in Singapore. In terms of professional cooperation, Malaysia is more diversified than for instance Singapore. Although there are interactions with global organisations, Malaysia also interacts much with Southeast Asian and East Asian countries and Islamic countries.

All together, Malaysia seems to be less exposed to processes of Westernisation or Americanisation than Singapore. It has taken up strongly the discourse of the knowledge economy and knowledge society, but through its very nationalist policies and its ethnic policies, the end result can be typified as a melange of Asian, Muslim and Western influences. This creates an environment where policies can become rather contradictory to each other. While for instance academic freedom is clearly restricted, the same academics are stimulated to become more innovative and entrepreneurial in their research. The same paradox is apparent for universities that have to become more entrepreneurial on the one hand, but are very much controlled by government on the other. Even the political discourse seems to be internally contradictory. Although in some ways it is very open, for instance in its economic and trade arrangements and also in its opening up to foreign universities, in other ways it has become and remained very nationalistic, illustrated by the strict requirements in which foreign institutions are allowed to operate in the country.

Indonesia

Until the period of colonisation, Indonesia has had a history that is somewhat similar to Malaysia (after all, neither of the countries existed as a nation before the colonial era). The first forms of (higher) education were based on Islamic foundations and teaching was often in Arabic. In the early 20th century, under the Dutch occupation, a first modern institution was established in Batavia (now Jakarta). This school called 'STOVIA' was a school for the training of medical doctors in the then Dutch East Indies. In 1920 an engineering school was established in Bandung, a school that is now known as Institut Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia's leading technical university. More professional training was provided in an agricultural school in Bogor (now IPB) and a law school in Jakarta. These schools were established to provide the manpower needed for the colonial administration. An important side-effect however was that the provision of higher education (not just in Indonesia, but also in the Netherlands) aroused political awareness and resistance to the colonial powers. In the Second World War, the Japanese education has proven to be detrimental to the system at that time. In this period, Dutch books were banned, destroying the only source of modern knowledge. Also military training became part of education and strict limits emerged for academic freedom. After 1945, Indonesia started a process of reconstruction, and the Dutch that returned after the Japanese were defeated reopened the existing schools and provided teaching in Dutch by Dutch teachers. In 1949, after the Dutch were forced to leave the Archipelago, the language of instruction was changed to Bahasa Indonesia, which had become the national language in 1928, but which now was also seen as a way of uniting the young nation.

In the 1950s the system of higher education expanded. Both the enrolments in existing schools in the main urban regions increased, but also the number of universities in the islands outside Java. This rapid expansion of the system led to doubts about the quality of higher education. The rapid expansion could hardly be absorbed by the small academic labour force and the economic downturn in the late 1950s and early 1960s meant that there were not enough resources to train personnel. At the same time it was a period of great political turbulence and the academic world and students formed the core of the political activism in this period. Another issue that harmed the quality of education was the switch from Dutch to Bahasa Indonesia. Most of the books and many staff in that time were Dutch and Bahasa Indonesia had not before been a language in science. With Sukarno's Guided Democracy also came a strong government control over universities. In the 1961 Law on higher education (which still forms the legal foundation of higher education) the Tri Dharma was introduced, explicitly stating that the university had three functions: education, research and services to the community.

After the coup of 1965 and Suharto's turn to power, there became more American involvement in higher education. Especially the Ford Foundation and USAID became active in this field and a large number of inter-university links were set up as a mechanism to modernise the Indonesian system. Soon after that, US educated staff gained a dominant position, especially in the big universities. Buchori and Malik (2004: 258-259) illustrate this:

Interaction with the academic world in the West, especially the United States, had raised awareness among these faculty about the value of productivity and efficiency in the education process. The concept of the economics of education and a better understanding of the social investment of education had prompted more serious steps toward improving the teaching and learning process. These trends in turn led to a re-evaluation of the European style system of higher education that was associated with an unstructured, lengthy period of study and low productivity.

As a result, the European model was gradually replaced by a more Anglo-American inspired system. Changes were for instance made in the structure of the learning process, with requirements for attending lectures and completing assignments, and also the structure of educational administration was made more efficient. With this came for instance the introduction of a credit-hour system to make the educational planning process easier for both staff and students. In this period, also the technocrats in the Suharto government were educated in the US (mainly Berkeley) and applied their new knowledge rigorously to the Indonesian economy. The shift from a predominantly political-ideological agenda to an economic agenda spilled over to the field of higher education, leading to the increased attention for efficiency and effectiveness in educational processes and the role of the university in the national economy.

With the further expansion of higher education, the worries about quality remained. Staff (or at least a substantial part of it) is not only insufficiently trained, but also insufficiently committed. Due to low incomes, many of the staff are involved in consultancy functions or teach at private universities in order to supplement their salaries. The lack of funding is an issue that stretches over all activities in the universities, including the lack of classrooms and other facilities. Another important issue, especially since the mid 1990s, is relevance. There is a strong imbalance in the disciplines with shortages in the science and engineering fields. One explanation for this is the emergence in Indonesia of a huge private sector, now accounting for 1800

of the 1900 institutions and 60% of the students. The investments for setting up science or engineering course in these private institutions is simply too high and instead many courses are offered in programmes like business administration, accounting , etc.

To deal with the questions of relevance and quality, the Ministry set up an accreditation board. First this board only assessed private institutions and the highest assessment they could make was 'disamakan' or equalised, meaning that the private institution in question would gain equal status compared to similar public universities. In 1996, the board switched to programme accreditation and made that compulsory for all institutions, public and private. Accreditation was one of the pillars of the strategic plan for 1996-2005. The other pillars on which future Indonesian higher education had to be based were: evaluation, accountability, autonomy. These four pillars were seen as contributing to the final pillar: quality. The most obvious effect of this 'new paradigm of higher education' has been the changed legal status of the countries four most prestigious institutions: Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta, Universitas Gadjah Mada in Yogyakarta, Institut Teknologi Bandung (Institut of Technology Bandung) and Institut Pertanian Bogor (Institute of Agricultural Bogor). These institutions were selected to function as "guides" in Indonesia's move toward greater academic and financial autonomy. In subsequent stages, universities in islands other than Java (e.g., the University of Northern Sumatra in Medan in 2003) follow this path of transition. The origin of these reforms can be traced back to the 1996 Strategic plan but also to several international programmes. In the 1990s, several World Bank and Asian Development Bank programs were initiated – such as Quality for Undergraduate Education, Development of Undergraduate Education, and University Research for Graduate Education. These programs focus on improving the quality and efficiency of higher education through competitive development grants, and requiring universities to take a more active role. The post-1998 events did have an accelerating effect on the reforms. Increasing university autonomy was also in line with the IMF reform packages and increasing accountability and transparency clearly fitted the call for Reformasi. Furthermore, the country's major universities are also expected to play an important role in the strengthening of the economy and in the empowerment of the regions (that are also becoming increasingly autonomous).

The most recent plans for higher education seem to continue on this road. The Higher education Long Term Strategy focuses on the quality of education, research and community practices and of organisational procedures, but also it explicitly takes the improvement of national competitiveness as one of its goals (Tadjudin, 2005). Indonesia also attempts to build up their own regional innovation systems, like One North in Singapore and the Multimedia Corridor in Malaysia. The idea of the Bandung High Tech Valley emerged in a McKinsey report commissioned by the Ministry of Industry and Trade of Indonesia (Rahardjo, 2002). This initiative has until now failed to evolve into a successful innovative region.

Higher education policies in Indonesia have undoubtedly been influenced through the penetration of organisations like development banks and the IMF, especially in the period after the Asian crisis and Indonesia's transition to democracy. Although the involvement of especially the IMF was substantial, it is likely that at the same time the Indonesian government was also looking abroad for examples to use as models for their own institutions. This however does not come to the fore in their current policies and it is therefore more likely to assume that they modelled themselves after the generic models that were at that time provided by the IMF and the World Bank.

Issues of standardisation or harmonisation or other side effects of transnational activity have not directly shaped the higher education policies. Indonesia until now has a fairly closed system with few foreign students and no significant interest in offshore education from foreign universities. Although the government has relaxed its rules relating to the entrance of foreign providers, the country is at this moment probably too unstable to attract interested parties. In the future however, if the economy recovers from the aftershocks of the currency crisis and the threat of terrorism weakens, Indonesia might appear to become a vast new market for foreign providers.

As noted above, the government has not taken any specific templates or exemplars from other countries and the mechanisms of emulation and imitation have thus not been at work substantially in Indonesia. More international influence has come from the socialisation of norms in the professional and academic circles. Indonesia has a history of strong involvement of international organisations and foreign donors. First during its struggle for independence following World War II and later because its strategic location in the Cold War setting, its oil resources and – more contemporary – its role model as an Islamic democracy. Two main ways through which norm socialisation has taken place are through educational exchanges and through professional networking. The influence of foreign education became very clear in the economic policies of the country in the periods when economic technocrats dominated the cabinets. But also in academia, the returning academics took with them new views on the organisation and administration of education. The inter-university links that were established between the US and Indonesia have probably contributed to this. Also, Indonesian academics and other professionals in the field of education – especially those in the well-known universities in the urban centres – have been very frequently involved in workshops, seminars, conferences and the like. Many of them have become very well accustomed to the ‘international organisation language’ and know how to open doors to various international agencies. The awareness of the ways things are done in other countries has also influenced the way Indonesia looks at its higher education system, leading especially to more attention for the economics of education.

GLOBAL IDEAS, LOCAL ADOPTION AND REGIONAL CONVERGENCE

In this section the case studies above are used to explore two issues. First, an analysis is presented of how the internationalisation of domestic policies has changed over time in order to see whether different mechanisms have been at work in different stages in history. Second, the extent to which these mechanisms have led to convergence in the region will be explored by analysing convergence in the different stages that Pollitt (2002) identified: convergence of discourse, decisions, practices and results.

Changing mechanisms

From the Southeast Asian cases above, it is clear that the mechanisms at work have changed over time. An inherent characteristic of colonial domination is of course coercion through penetration. It was the colonial rulers that set up the administrative structures and they did that according to their ideas. In this period in history there has obviously been convergence in many spheres of everyday life. This has been very evident for institutions related to economic and political administration and those related to religious life. The remnant of this part of history was not a process of global convergence but of regional convergence. In many of the old colonies, the specific

administrative, political, religious and also educational features of their colonisers are still apparent. In some countries they are more apparent than in others and some colonisers have transferred their structures more vigorously than others. In the field of higher education, the British elements are still visible in all of the commonwealth countries. All of them however have mixed these elements with very different local flavours. In our cases it is apparent that Malaysia and Singapore still display some core characteristics of the British system. This is true to a lesser extent for the case of Indonesia and the Dutch heritage.

For the postcolonial era, similar patterns can be detected in the three countries. After independence the countries continued to build their higher education system based on the coloniser's structures in order to create a political and economic elite. Social and political turbulence caused a rather nationalist turn, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia. In particular in Indonesia's guided democracy period and in Malaysia's New Economic Policy era, transnational activity was low and international linkages were few. In Indonesia, the New Order showed a new economic openness and through its strategic position in the Cold War era, the Indonesian higher education system created numerous linkages with American universities, organisations and foundations. This set in motion a form of norm socialisation of professionals, especially through education.

In the 1990s, for the first time the policies in the three countries became based on somewhat similar policy ideas or, in other words, there appears to be a convergence of discourse. Many of the policy shifts are similar to those experienced elsewhere: greater institutional autonomy in order to become more entrepreneurial and a strong focus on the university as an institution serving the (knowledge) economy. In Singapore this partly fitted the road they entered in the late 1970s. It was however implemented without fundamentally changing the strong state control over the educational institutions. It is in this way creating a hybrid by drawing both from examples abroad, which increasingly is the United States and from the distinct Singapore agenda of nation building and economic growth. The language or discourse used by the Singaporean leaders over time, very much resembles Mahatir's *Wawasan 2020* for Malaysia. In the case of Malaysia it is however very much mixed with the ethnic policies of the country and the rhetoric of catching up with developing countries while preserving the Asian values. The discourse has also been taken over by Indonesia, where this 'knowledge society' thinking very much coincides with the changes in the policies of major financial institutions like development banks and the IMF. The specific Indonesian circumstances at that time however, with the toppling of Suharto and the search for economic and political stability, have made this process in Indonesia far less rapid than in Malaysia and especially Singapore.

What the exploration above indicates is that even when countries adhere to similar ideas of progress and advancement – as is currently more or less the case in the three countries – the national peculiarities, national cultures, national resources, and national political-legal systems have led to very divergent results. This confirms Pollitts argument that in order to look whether convergence occurs, one needs to analyse the different stages and not just the 'talk' about reforms. In the next section we will go through these changes and (tentatively) explore where the countries converge and diverge.

Levels of convergence

The current discourse in the three countries – and in many other countries in the world – can be termed the *knowledge economy discourse*. Increasingly the three countries call for changes in their higher education and research system, with the need for greater economic and social relevance of both teaching and research as the bottom line. In Singapore, this discourse was converted into policy decisions as soon as 1979 with its ‘2nd industrial revolution’. In the framework of this campaign, universities became the providers of highly skilled human resources for the Singaporean economy and providers for knowledge for the Singaporean high-tech industries.

The discourse in Malaysia is best illustrated by the Wawasan 2020 propagated by Malaysia’s former Prime Minister Mahatir in 1991. This strategy for Malaysia to become “fully developed along all dimensions” and to establish “a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward-looking” increasingly saw high-tech (especially information technology) and knowledge as crucial for attaining this vision. For higher education, this vision was made concrete by the 1996 Act, formally a shift from state control to state supervision, although the government did retain a strong control over higher education. The shift in policy and the corporatisation of universities should enable universities to cater to the emerging Malaysian knowledge society. To achieve Vision 2020, the government set higher targets for participation rates and in this, emphasised the role of science and technology. Universities needed to accommodate this demand and they also needed to diversify their funding, increasing the focus on research contracts and linkages with industry. Parallel to these developments however, the state has attempted to give higher education a Malaysian identity. All private institutions must conduct their courses in the national language. To teach a course in English they must obtain permission from the minister of education. In addition, all institutions must offer required courses in Malaysian studies, Islamic studies (for Muslim students), and moral education (for non-Muslim students). These courses are aimed at transmitting cultural heritage and national identity to the students, including foreign students who are also required to take courses on the national language (Lee, 2000). Despite this shift, the quota systems for the different ethnic populations also stayed in place.

Indonesia has not had similar strong discourses about the course of the nation as a whole such as the Wawasan 2020 and the 2nd Industrial revolution campaigns. In Indonesian higher education however the new knowledge society discourse can be recognised in the ‘new paradigm for higher education’ announced in 1995. The relevance of higher education and of the graduates of the system becomes one of the explicit aspects of this paradigm. The role of the university in producing graduates for the national economy is also strongly emphasised in the most recent Higher Education Long Term Strategy. The Indonesian agenda however is also mixed with particular national issues. Especially the geographical equity in this vast nation of islands has become a major issue. The experiments with autonomy that are currently taking place needs to enable universities to better adjust to these new environmental pressures and to be better able to produce graduates for a competitive economy.

Evidently, the discourses in the three countries follow a similar pattern. The policies however show less convergence. The view of the university’s relevance for the national economy has gained increasing attention in each of the countries. Singapore started this rather early and seems to have developed a comprehensive strategy for accomplishing this. It has been successful in setting up an economy that depends on highly skilled people and in setting up a higher education system to support this economy. In Malaysia and Indonesia these issues have become priority as

well, but they have become very much mixed with internal policies. In the case of Malaysia that was the New Economic Policy and the ethnic quota policies, while in Indonesia the issues of geographical equity and funding (especially after the Asian crisis) play an important role. In Indonesia this has developed parallel with the major shifts in institutional autonomy (although this concerns only few universities at this moment). The selected universities have turned from strongly state controlled universities into semi-independent institutions, partly because of pressure of international organisations. In Malaysia this has been the case in theory, but in practice the state still has a strong hand in the further development of the universities. Institutional autonomy has been less of an issue in Singapore, which can be explained partly because of the small size of the system and partly by the overall strong role of the government in the city state. Another issue is the emphasis on science and technology in higher education. This emphasis has been much more apparent in the discourse and the policies of Singapore and Malaysia than in Indonesia, even though the latter country shows a substantial overrepresentation in enrolments in social sciences and humanities. In Malaysia as well as in Singapore, the national government takes a very proactive role in promoting science and technology, for instance through regional innovation systems like the Multimedia Corridor in Malaysia and One North in Singapore. A similar system envisaged in the Jakarta-Bandung region in Indonesia has never had much priority of the government.

The facts that the global discourse of the knowledge society becomes apparent in the policies of the three countries, the peculiarities of the countries has led to some similarities but also substantial differences in the higher education policies that need to support the emergence of these knowledge societies. To really study the practices – let alone results – of the three countries more detailed data is needed about what is actually happening in the implementation process. This trajectory is outside the scope of this paper but will be subject of the remainder of this research project.

CONCLUSIONS AND PREVIEW

The theoretical exploration and the country analyses in this paper do not provide enough information to present conclusions about the precise extent of convergence. What it did result in are indications that convergence indeed seems to decrease when going down the ladder of the four stages of discourse, decisions, practices and results. This at least is the case for the formalisation stage where the discourse is translated into decisions and formal policies. The implementation and execution of these policies however need a more detailed analysis. Pollitt (2002) discusses methodological issues in relation to the four stages. Discursive convergence is most obviously researched using the largely desk-based techniques of documentary analysis and textual deconstruction of documents, political speeches, conference agendas, keywords in academic and professional publications, and so on. Research on decisional convergence is rather straightforward and requires collection and classification of governmental and/or organisational policy documents. To research practice convergence is a tougher challenge than identifying formal decisions. Rarely do official policy documents offer sufficient information of what is going on ‘on the floor’ and therefore, more extensive fieldwork is necessary. Most difficulties can be expected when researching the convergence of results and especially in the case of comparative research on the outputs of specific policies, which might be difficult to measure *and* hard to compare.

Despite the limited scope of this paper, there are two conclusions that can be drawn. First of all, the claim that it is useful to look at non-functional explanations in order to explain domestic policies can be supported. The cases provided various indications about the way that international coercion, harmonisation, imitation and norm socialisation have an impact on domestic policy formation. In particular norm socialisation through networking is an influence that is frequently neglected. The country cases provide some indication that this is a strong force however and one that is very much increasing through the globalisation of academia and professions and through the ease of international communication and travel. Also the role of international education and the role of the abundance of international conferences, workshops, seminars, expert meetings, etc. and the role of think tanks and consultants might have profound effects on future policy making. Best practices seem to fly around the world in an instant and become increasingly adopted and socialised in professional networks. Diffusion through harmonisation was less observed in the three cases. This can probably be explained through the low level of regional integration in the ASEAN region. Although ASEAN is making progress in the liberalisation of markets, the flows in higher education and research (e.g. international students and staff, research linkages, flows of funding) are less apparent in this region. Harmonisation is more likely to occur in regions where there are many intergovernmental and supranational agreements in higher education such as the European Union.

Secondly, it has become clear that strong national forces are at play in the formalisation phase and that already this early in the process, issues that seemed to be converging in the discursive stage can result in very different policies, practices and results. This raises the theoretical issue of the two neo-institutional approaches that were discussed before. To what extent can we talk about global organisational fields or about a world polity or society in higher education and science? And to what extent are national peculiarities changing? Are they slowly washed away by globalisation or is globalisation strengthening the impact of these national peculiarities? These questions cannot be answered on the basis of the cases presented in this paper. In the next stages of the research project more in-depth and detailed analyses will be conducted for specific policies in the three countries.

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