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**Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation & hyperlink:**

Dang, QA 2018, 'An anatomy of authority: the Bologna and ASEM education secretariats as policy actors and region builders' *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 254-267.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2017.1402297>

DOI 10.1080/14767724.2017.1402297

ISSN 1476-7724

ESSN 1476-7732

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

***This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in *Globalisation, Societies and Education* on 08/12/2017, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14767724.2017.1402297>***

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# An Anatomy of Authority: The Bologna and ASEM Education Secretariats as Policy Actors and Region-Builders

Que Anh Dang

## Abstract

The Bologna and ASEM education secretariats have been in operation for around one decade. However, ~~but~~ their roles, and the nature of influence on the development of the Bologna and ASEM education processes, are often overlooked by practitioners and scholars. This paper examines the sources of authority behind these secretariats' technocratic appearance and administrative routines, and argues that they are transnational policy actors in their own right. By critically analysing drawing on the principal-agent theory and the concept of 'authority' of international bureaucracies, the paper offers an alternative framework for understanding authority - one that provides a theoretical basis for viewing these secretariats as capable of taking autonomous actions. The two case studies suggest new ways of understanding the various forms of authority and generate three important insights. First, 1) it shows how the secretariats derive their authority from the tasks delegated by states, from the moral values and social purpose they uphold, and from the expertise they possess. Second, ~~;~~ 2) it explains and compares how the different governance structures of the Bologna and ASEM education processes impact on the secretariats' authority. And, third, ~~;~~ 3) it highlights how the secretariats exercise their respective authorities and exert their discernable influence at different stages of higher education policy-making and region-building processes.

**Key words:** authority, power, regional secretariat, higher education, Bologna Process, ASEM.

## 1. Introduction

The Bologna Process (BP) and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Education Process are seen as regional and inter-regional higher education cooperation projects. Each process brings together some 50 member countries and international organisations and is facilitated by a regional secretariat. The BP's impact on the regional and national higher education policies in Europe and beyond over the last 15 years, and the role of the supranational actors, such as the European Commission, in this process, have been widely researched (Charlier & Croché, 2011; Corbett & Henkel, 2013; Dale, 2007; Dang, 2015; Figueroa, 2010; Keeling, 2006; Ravinet, 2008). The ASEM education process, launched in 2008, has also begun to influence higher education policy-making across Asia and Europe (Dang, 2016b). However, the Bologna and ASEM education secretariats that have been contributing to the development of these regional projects, only receive scant scholarly attention.

The first official Bologna secretariat was established in 2004 following the decision on a new Bologna follow-up structure made by the Berlin ministerial conference in 2003. Since then there have been six rotating Bologna secretariats which provide continuous administrative and technical support to the growing Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Generally, the Bologna secretariat is hosted by the country that organises the next ministerial conference and each rotation of service lasts about two years, in accordance with the cycle of the ministerial conferences. In a different institutional arrangement, the ASEM education secretariat (hereafter ASEM secretariat) was established in 2009, one year after the launch of the ASEM education process. The second ASEM education ministers' meeting decided that the secretariat should be hosted for a fixed period of four years, alternated between Asia and Europe, and hosted by a voluntary country which is not necessarily the host of the next ministerial meeting. Both the Bologna and ASEM secretariats assume similar primary functions of facilitating the regional and inter-regional cooperation in higher education.

Although on paper the secretariats are merely administrative secretarial assistants to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) and to the ASEM Senior Officials Meetings (SOM), they both perform important 'behind-the-scenes' roles in all ministerial conferences and follow-up meetings. Thus, they have become indispensable and influential in the

development and implementation of regional higher education policies. However, little is known about how the secretariats operate in multi-level governance structures, and where their authority comes from. ~~Therefore,~~ this paper seeks to enhance the understanding of authority of this particular kind of transnational actor - the regional secretariat - in a specific field of (inter)regional higher education policy-making. It does so by analysing the empirical data collected in the last seven years, including ethnographic observations at various Bologna and ASEM ~~M~~ministerial ~~C~~onferences, meetings with both secretariats, a two-week job-shadow at the ASEM secretariat, and eight interviews with the secretariat staff and ministerial officials of member countries. With a focus on authority, the paper asks: 1) ~~W~~here and how do the secretariats derive their authority? ~~And,~~ 2) ~~h~~How do they exercise their authority and exert influence on the regional policy-making in the Bologna and ASEM education processes?

Drawing on the international relations literature and ~~the two~~ case studies ~~of secretariats~~, the paper argues that the secretariats are not merely a passive actor in ~~the~~ principal-agent relationships but play an influential role as a transnational actor in different stages of the policy-making process, from agenda setting to implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The paper proceeds in the ~~following way. In the~~ next section ~~I with~~ presenting a conceptual understanding of international secretariats and highlights ~~the~~ special features of an education secretariat in the institutional contexts of the Bologna and ASEM processes. ~~The A~~ third section analyses the sources of authority and introduces new ways of understanding the various forms of authority. ~~The A~~ fourth section provides insights into how each secretariat exercises their authority in regional policy-making and region-building processes. ~~A final The last~~ section concludes ~~with paper with~~ on the implications of key sources of authority on the autonomy of regional education secretariats and highlights ~~their different ways of exerting~~ ~~the significant of this~~ influence ~~for~~ on the continuity and sustainability of the regional projects.

## **2. Principal - Agent Theory Revisited: Regional Secretariats as Autonomous Actors**

In order to understand the role and authority of these regional secretariats it is necessary to explore the relationship between them and ~~the national~~ states. The classical principal-agent theory is one way to explain such a relationship by looking at the question of why ~~national~~ states (principals) create agents (international organisations), delegate tasks to

them, and how these states devise control mechanisms to keep the agents in check. Early works of this approach exhibited an 'anti-agent bias' and emphasised the principal side (Elsig, 2010). Scholars working within this mainstream approach to international relations ~~theory~~ have attributed limited agency to international organisations (IOs), and generally treated them as creations or instruments of states designed to reflect state preferences, to further state interests, and to solve problems for states (Dijkstra, 2008). Realists see IOs as reflecting on the distribution of power ~~distribution amongst~~ their members and in serving the interests of powerful states. ~~while~~ Ffunctionalists describe IOs as facilitators who can help overcome obstacles to collaboration, lower transaction costs of cooperation, provide information and boost their r members' commitment (Elsig, 2010). According to this principal-agent theory, states exercise power, while IOs are passive structures with limited delegated authority, this. ~~Such~~ kind of authority is seen as a commodity over which states have property rights and it can be transferred to or removed from an IO (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). ~~In this view, IOs do not have ontological independence and are not purposive actors in their own right.~~ In other words, IOs are treated as 'empty shells' or 'impersonal policy machinery' to be manipulated by states (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, p. 704).

Viewing IOs in such a functionalist and statist fashion may not accord with reality. Many IOs nowadays take actions that are unanticipated by their creators and unsanctioned by their member states (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004). Hence, authority should not be seen only as a commodity of states, rather it is an attribute of IOs generated from particular relations they have with other actors. The Bologna and ASEM secretariats are the case in point as this paper will demonstrate. They contribute to devising new regional education agendas, formulating new norms/rules, which then change national politics and societies fundamentally (Beck, 2005, p. 162). From a constructivist perspective, IOs are seen as autonomous actors and as bureaucracies with ideas and preferences of their own (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999, 2004, 2005). The authors also argue that IOs possess authority to exert influence not simply because they have control of information and/or money, but because they use their rational-legal authority to orient actions and shape the behaviours of others in both direct and indirect ways. Their authority is 'rational' in that it deploys socially recognised relevant knowledge to create rules and procedures that determine how social goals will be pursued (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). To further advance this argument, the Bologna and ASEM secretariats provide interesting case studies, which exemplify how international

agents were created to facilitate inter-governmental cooperation projects. ~~However,~~ ~~but~~ over time ~~the~~ agents developed into autonomous and purposive actors who use their authority to actively construct and consolidate the Bologna and ASEM education processes. This point will be further elaborated in the empirical section.

Drawing on ~~the~~ sociological institutionalist ~~m~~ approaches, the Bologna and ASEM secretariats can also be seen as issue-specific international bureaucracies within broader institutional structures, such as political and economic cooperation in the EU and ASEM frameworks. These secretariats administer collaborative activities among ministries of higher education, hence, represent the collective interests of member countries. The function of representing a collective of governmental institutions makes them *public* actors (S. Bauer, 2006). The political processes they serve, and the interactions ~~they make~~ with the ministries and other organisations in Europe and Asia are transnational in nature. ~~They,~~ therefore, ~~they~~ occupy the position of a transnational actor. However, they are *non-state* actors as they ~~simply~~ are not states. It is not mutually exclusive for a political entity to be public and non-state (ibid:28), but this has implications ~~for~~ authority and power. For example, these education secretariats do not have the material capabilities and power like of the a state to coerce other actors into actions, but the people and social purposes they serve make them respected and authoritative. ~~Therefore,~~ they rely more on rational-legal authority that gives them the basic form (bureaucracy serving a social purpose) and behavioural vocabulary (impersonal, technocratic) to induce compliance (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005).

Most studies about secretariats examine large international organisations, such as the EU Council Secretariat, various EU treaty secretariats, the World Trade Organisation's Secretariat, the OECD Secretariat, the United Nations, and the World Bank Group (M. W. Bauer & Ege, 2016; Christiansen, 2002a, 2002b, Dijkstra, 2008, 2010; Elsig, 2010; Juncos & Pomorska, 2010; Marcussen & Trondal, 2011). These scholars concentrate on the role and behaviors of a few chief executives who are international civil servants, many of whom are former national ministers. One of the features that qualify an international secretariat to be an actor in world politics is the host of international civil servants. They are employed by a secretariat, organised by a hierarchical structure, and equipped with collective resources (S. Bauer, 2006). They shape the secretariat's 'bureaucratic personality' as much as, if not more than, the legal personality which is ~~commonly~~ generated from a legal document. Such 'bureaucratic personality' must be maintained by a collective of international civil servants

who first and foremost serve the objectives of the secretariats and not so much the interests of the countries they are individually affiliated with by nationality (ibid, p.29). Therefore, beyond their rational-legal authority mentioned above, the secretariats possess a special authority, such as alleged neutrality and moral stand on championing the common interests of member countries, and their expertise in a particular field (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, pp. 21–24). With this special authority, the secretariat's staff are able and willing to detect and exploit the leeway that their principals grant them. In essence, this action also makes them relatively autonomous.

### 3. The Sources of the Secretariats' Authority

Authority is a social construction and it exists within social relations that constitute and legitimate it. Authority means the ability of IOs to deploy discursive and institutional resources in order to induce changes and make other actors comply with these changes (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 2005). Authority enables IOs to effectively shape the behaviours of other actors without the use of coercion and sanctions. Hence, 'authority' is clearly distinct from 'power'. Power may be seized or taken whereas authority must be conferred and requires consent from other actors (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005; Elsig, 2010). IOs draw their substantive authority from three broad sources: delegation, morality and expertise.

- a) Delegation refers to *delegated authority* from the states when states (principals) put IOs (agents) in charge of certain tasks (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). For instance, the European Commission's authority derives from the authority delegated to it by the European Union's member states; whilst the United Nations' authority to do peacekeeping is given to it by member countries. States often delegate to IOs tasks which they cannot perform themselves, and/or about which they have limited knowledge. Delegated tasks, therefore, need to be analysed, interpreted, and implemented (or planned) with the expertise and experience of IO staff. ~~That is,~~ to a certain degree, their delegation creates a degree of relative autonomy because IOs must be autonomous in some ways simply to fulfil their tasks. However, delegation authorises IOs to act autonomously only to the extent that they appear to be serving the delegators. Because delegated authority is authority on loan, to use it, IOs must maintain that they are faithful to their mandates and they must be presented as not autonomous, but as dutiful agents (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005).



- b) The *moral authority* of IOs often derives from their status as representative of the shared interests, or defender of the values of the international community (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). For example, the UN organisations often use their status as the protector of peace, security, and human rights, to create autonomy from member states. The World Bank's universal concern is to 'work for a world free of poverty', thus inducing deference from governments and citizens. The Bologna Process promotes fundamental values, such as academic freedom, institutional autonomy, democracy, public responsibilities for higher education, and European solidarity. IOs are created to embody, serve and protect such moral values. In practice, they also present themselves as champions of those values, and in doing so therefore, they can appear to be above politics and draw support for their actions.
- c) *Expertise* makes IOs authoritative because states want important tasks to be carried out by people with specialised knowledge (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005). For example, the HIV/AIDS epidemic should be handled by doctors and public health specialists who know about disease prevention. Similarly, regional higher education cooperation should be coordinated and facilitated by higher education experts. Specialised knowledge and experience persuade people to confer with and depend on experts. Also, professionals and experts value specialised knowledge because they believe that such knowledge could benefit society. As guardians of such knowledge, IO staff also perceive themselves to be acting in the name of the public good. They think that their expertise makes them suited to advancing the community's goals and improving society. The level of expertise also shapes the ways IOs behave and induce policy changes (Barnett & Finnemore, 1999). IOs possess not only technical and scientific knowledge of the policy problems but also administrative and procedural knowledge, as well as normative and diplomatic knowledge which is relevant to deal with the complex web of connections and actors in the international regimes (Elsig, 2010).

In summary, the three types of delegated, moral and expert authority contribute in different ways to making IOs autonomous and authoritative actors. However, in exercising their authority, IOs must present themselves as embodying the values of the collective and as serving the interests of others (e.g. their principals) in an impartial, neutral and technocratic



way. It is the appearance of depoliticisation that is critical to their legitimacy and authority (Barnett & Finnemore, 2005).

Barnett and Finnemore provide a theoretical ground to understand the substantive authority of IOs including the regional secretariats of this paper. However, the Bologna and ASEM secretariats operate with their own particularities that arguably affect their level of authority and the ways in which they exercise it. *First*, the two secretariats operate in the education sector that is deemed ~~very~~ important to the national culture and sovereignty. I; therefore external authority and influence are often unwelcome and resisted by the state (principal). *Second*, unlike the large and permanent IOs in the extant literature, the Bologna and ASEM secretariats are small operations hosted and financed primarily by one country, and they rotate on a relatively short cycle. Consequently, their technical and administrative knowledge, their authority over the flow of information and institutional memory may be constrained by the rotation. *Third*, the secretariats' staff are not international civil servants, they are national or, in some cases, regional higher education experts who are employed by the host countries or seconded by the sponsoring countries. Therefore, their authority may depend not only on the level of expertise but also the kind of knowledge they possess. The characteristics and political orientation of the local host institution(s) (e.g. ministry office, independent organisation) may also affect the secretariats' authority a great deal.

In conclusion, Barnett's and Finnemore's framework may be inadequate to explain the sources of the secretariats' authority and policy influence when it comes to questions such as 'in what way do the diverging interests, informal institutions, unclear mandates and lack of consensus among member states affect the secretariats' autonomy and authority?'; and 'which knowledge and expertise do the Bologna and ASEM secretariats choose to influence the reform of higher education systems at regional and inter-regional levels?'. The next section will examine these questions by analysing the workings of the two secretariats and the ways they exert their influence on policy-making in practice.

#### **4. The Bologna and ASEM Secretariats: Authority and Influence on Regional Higher Education Policy-making**

##### *4.1. Governance structure and delegated authority*

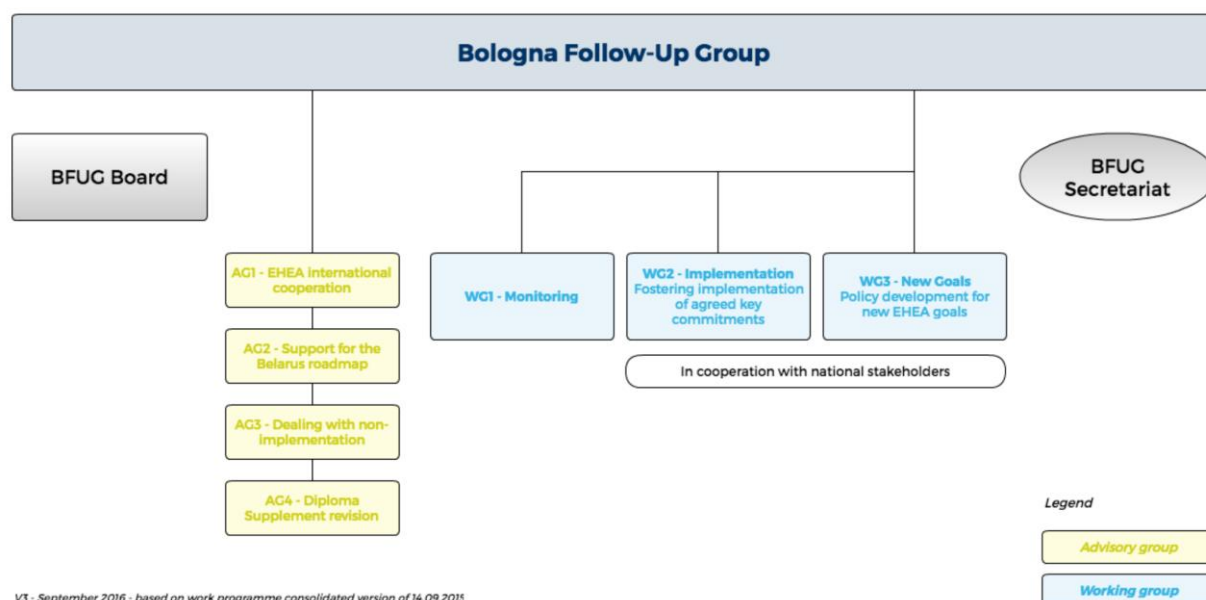
Neither the Bologna nor the ASEM education processes had an official secretariat in the beginning, instead, ~~those~~ countries ~~that~~ who hosted the regional meetings set up an ad-hoc unit to provide administrative support. With the establishment of the official secretariats, the two processes became more institutionalised, although they both claim to be informal in nature. The third Bologna ~~M~~inisterial ~~C~~onference in 2003 admitted seven new member countries<sup>ii</sup> making a total of 40 signatories, and adopted a new follow-up structure. Such membership size required that “the overall follow-up work will be supported by a Secretariat which the country hosting the next Ministerial Conference will provide. ... the Follow-up Group is asked to further define the responsibilities and the tasks of the Secretariat” (Bologna Process, 2003). Since January 2004 there have been six Bologna rotating secretariats,<sup>iii</sup> and for the first time since its establishment, the current French secretariat (2015-2018) is operating with staff seconded by other member countries. The mandates and functions of the Bologna Secretariat were first set out in the terms of reference approved by the BFUG meeting in Rome in November 2003. This document has been amended/updated over the years and tailored to each secretariat. The main mandate of the present Bologna secretariat is “...to provide neutral support to further the consolidation of the EHEA under the exclusive authority of the BFUG and its Chairs and Vice-Chair” (BFUG, ~~2015~~PAGE??, 2015). This broad mandate is accompanied by a list of functions and methods of operation ranging from a policy entrepreneur’s tasks (e.g. setting agendas for the BFUG meetings, preparing background discussion documents, checking the implementation of the work programme) ~~and to a~~ facilitator’s tasks (e.g. assist and support working groups, advisory groups and the Board), ~~and to a~~ secretariat’s tasks (e.g. arranging meetings, seminars, taking minutes, updating the EHEA website).

The Bologna Process governance structure ~~clearly~~ has an impact on the authority of the secretariat. Since 2010 the BP has been chaired at any time on an equal basis by two chairs: the EU presidency and a non-EU country. The chairs rotate every six months in accordance with the EU presidency, but the vice chair – the host country of the secretariat and of the next ministerial conference – holds the position for the whole duration of the secretariat’s mandate between the two ministerial conferences. For example, between the ministerial conferences in 2012 and 2015, the Armenian secretariat has worked with 12 chairs (six pairs) and ensured the continuity of the activities and institutional memory over three years. The relationships between the Bologna secretariat and the rotating chairs are dynamic;

when the chairs are weak (e.g. due to lack of personnel, capacity and/or interest), they rely more on the secretariat. In this way; ~~thus~~, the secretariat becomes more authoritative and influential and vice versa (interview in November 2014). Generally, the frequent change in the EU presidency and short term of the chairmanship of the Bologna Process create a greater need for advice, institutional memory and coordination from the secretariat, consequently, rendering greater authority to them. In the BP governance structure, the Bologna secretariat ‘serves’ all the key actors (e.g. BFUG, all its sub-structures, member countries) as illustrated in Figure 1.

the figure below.

Figure 1: The Bologna Secretariat in the Bologna Follow-Up Group and its Sub-structures



Source: BFUG Work Programme 2015-2018<sup>iv</sup>

Drawing on the Bologna experience, the ASEM secretariat was established early in the process. The justification for the creation of the secretariat and its mandate are laid out in the second ASEM ministerial meeting’s conclusions.

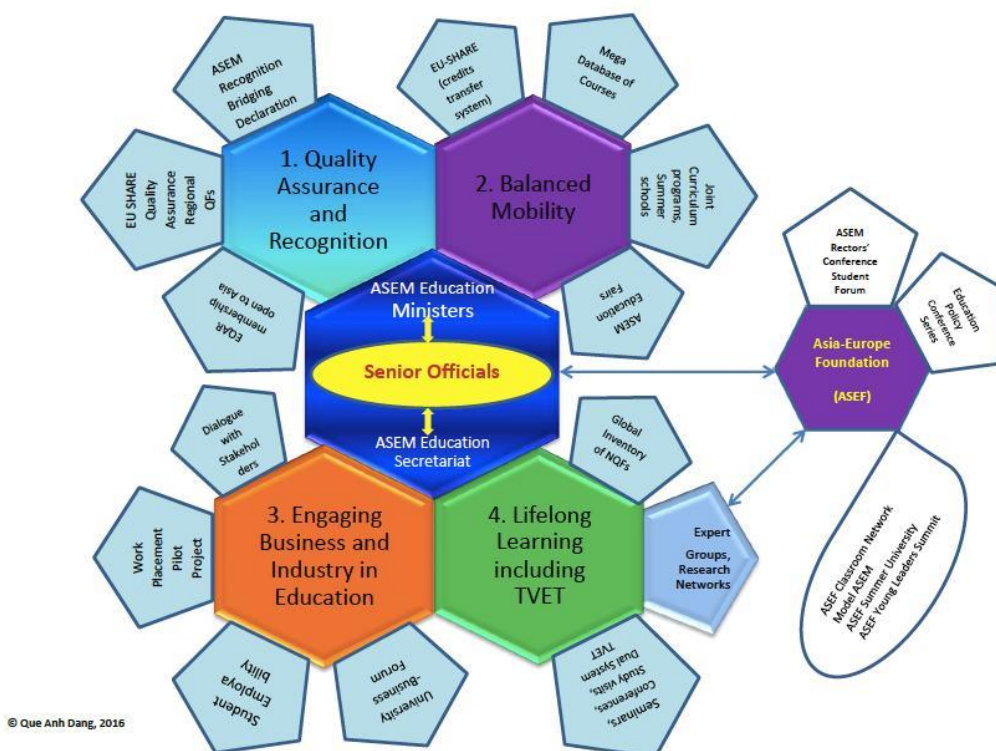
“The Meeting agreed [...]

to establish a rotating ASEM Education Secretariat (AES) to ensure effective coordination and sustainable progress of the ASEM process. The AES will coordinate ASEM education activities, help with preparation for ASEM ministerial meetings, and facilitate the implementation of output-oriented initiatives that contribute to education policy development and practices. The Meeting

welcomed Germany's offer to host the ASEM Education Secretariat for the first four-year cycle and invited ASEM member countries to join and send in staff" (ASEMME2, 2009, p. 4).

The first ASEM secretariat was financed by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research and physically located at the Headquarters of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Bonn between 2009 and 2013 with seconded staff from Indonesia, China, and the Benelux countries. Given the large size of ASEM membership and the diversity of ASEM higher education systems, ensuring 'effective coordination' and 'sustainable progress' of this newly created education process is deemed to be a vitally important mandate for the secretariat. Despite its apparently limited formal roles and the fact that, in the beginning, the ASEM secretariat seemed to remain in the background and operate behind the scenes, the this Bonn-based secretariat then became a well-illuminated visible centre of the ASEM education institutional architecture. The secretariat interacts with different actors around the ASEM four-point agenda as shown in figure 2 below.

Figure 2: ASEM Education Process and its Secretariat



Source: Author (Dang, 2016a, p. 324)

In practice, the secretariat was not only a conference organiser and minute-taker, their influence increased quickly as they took on various roles, such as agenda-setting, advisor for the member countries, representation for the ASEM education process. For example, as ‘coordinator and facilitator’, the Bonn Secretariat delivered ASEM official speak at a number of events within the ASEM process, such as expert seminars, Rectors’ conferences, as well as the Bologna Policy Forum.

The BP adopts a formal document on the ‘terms of reference’ defining the functions of its secretariat, whereas the ASEM education process, due to its informality, seems to ‘make the rules along the way’ by adding specific tasks of the secretariat to the Chair’s conclusions of each ministers’ meeting. In practice, the ASEM secretariat drafts these Chair’s conclusions and assigns those tasks to themselves at their discretion provided that these tasks suit the secretariat’s competences and interests. For example, in the four-point agenda depicted in figure 2 above, the Bonn-based secretariat was particularly interested in the issues of ‘quality assurance’ and ‘student mobility’ between Asia and Europe because the director and staff are experts in these fields, whereas ‘lifelong learning’ was largely neglected by the secretariat. During the tenure of this secretariat, in two ASEM Chair’s conclusions, there appeared clauses under the topic of quality assurance.

‘...with support of the ASEM Education Secretariat, an extensive glossary of quality assurance terms used in both regions should be compiled’ (ASEMME3, 2011, p. 4)

and under the student mobility topic:

‘The Ministers [...] urged the ASEM Education Secretariat to organise workshops in order to develop, together with experts from ASEM members, a strategy for balanced mobility and prepare a first draft with recommendations for the next ministerial meeting’ (ASEMME3, 2011).

or a rather grand statement on ‘follow-up’ tasks:

“The Ministers mandated the ASEM Education Secretariat to observe and assist the member countries in implementing the proposed initiatives and to inform the Ministers on the progress achieved with the stocktaking report for ASEMME5 in 2015” (ASEMME4, 2013).

Although the Bologna and ASEM stocktaking reports are based on the national reports, one notable difference is that the ASEM secretariat has so far been the lead author of all ASEM stocktaking reports whereas the Bologna secretariat has not been an author, but a technical assistant for gathering information. The stocktaking report is crafted by a BFUG working

group involving the secretariats, many individuals (ministerial officials, academics, independent consultants), and institutions (statistical agencies, sponsor – the European commission). Consequently, the delegated authority of the two secretariats is determined not only by the level of involvement of the secretariats, but more importantly, by the nature and objectives of the two kinds of stocktaking reports.

Evidently, the ASEM secretariat has greater delegated authority to compose the narrative reports which primarily showcase positive progress of the joint activities and pilot projects in higher education that has been proposed and implemented voluntarily by various small groups of member countries. There are no criteria to compare them; rather the reports are to “trigger more ASEM joint projects” (interview in March 2015) because the density of such projects and emergent networks will thicken the connections between the two regions. The most substantial change brought about by the first ASEM status report<sup>v</sup> was the a temporal shift of the ASEM agenda in 2011. From 2008 to 2011, the interval between the ministers’ meetings changed from annual to biennial so that some institutional memory was lost. Meanwhile, there were several new members joining ASEM (Australia, New Zealand and the Russian Federation). Therefore, this status report and the secretariat (whose director and deputy director were heavily involved in the previous two ASEM ministers’ meetings) were the official sources of information and inputs for discussion on progress, and the continuity of the ASEM education process. The status report was a manifestation of the secretariat’s authority that accentuated the topics around higher education, and marginalised others. Consequently, the Danish original agenda<sup>vi</sup> on mathematics and sciences education at school level gave way to the four-point agenda exclusively on higher education as depicted in Figure 2-above. The act of shifting the agenda subsequently exerts influence on how member countries select the relevant ministers<sup>vii</sup> and senior officials to meetings, assign the right experts to join pilot projects and working groups, and sponsor the ‘relevant’ activities that serve to fulfil the agenda. In other words, the S-secretariat influenced the strategic selection of actors and their interactions, thus shaping policy outcomes.

In the Bologna Process, the stocktaking reports’ primary objectives are to ‘check the progress’ of the European-wide higher education structural reform by using a set of detailed criteria and benchmarks designed for the tool called ‘the Bologna scorecards’ which measure and compare the progress of all signatories (EHEA website). Although these criteria were agreed to by the BFUG, the fact that the secretariat designs a standard national report



template as a method of collecting data on each country's progress, is, in essence, an act of exercising its authority to create an objective, technical, and procedural practice. The national report template has also been revised by each rotating secretariat to reflect their expert knowledge about the changes in the Bologna goals. There was no standard template in 2003; countries sent in descriptions of their higher education systems, and in a few cases, with reference to the Bologna goals. Then the first secretariat designed a simple template asking for descriptive data from member countries in 2005, whereas in 2009 the template became a comprehensive questionnaire survey designed as an advanced digital tool to gather and process data.

The stocktaking report then gave way to the EHEA Implementation Report (2012, 2015) which has drawn mainly on the quantitative data from the specialist statistics organisations (Eurydice, Eurostat, Eurostudent). Subsequently, the presentation of the report has also changed to include more scorecard statistics and to resemble the OECD graphic report style (see the EHEA website<sup>viii</sup>), which is considered by the BFUG to be 'more objective', 'more professional', and containing a 'clear comparative view' (interviews in May 2014 and May 2015). Such technical instruments are increasingly tending to replace regulatory 'command and control' forms of governance with a form of soft governance by information and data (Zeitlin, 2011) developed in the most neoliberal version of new public management (Lascombes & Le Gales, 2007). The colourful illustrations and graphics of the report constitute a new powerful form of governance – 'governance by visualisation'.

In sum, the governance structures and political objectives of each process enable the secretariats to exercise their delegated authority in different ways. The informal institutional arrangements and loosely defined political objectives of the ASEM education process have given the ASEM secretariat more room to manoeuvre, thus making it an autonomous actor. The highly institutionalised and complex governance structure and clearly defined political objectives of the Bologna Process shape the Bologna secretariat's actions to a certain track and keep it as an agent to reduce the transaction costs of cooperation.

#### *4.2. Bureaucratic personality and expert authority*

The secretariats' expert authority is dependent on how it is perceived by the member countries, particularly the BFUG and SOM, and key stakeholders. Such perceptions, in turn, largely depends on the ways in which the 'bureaucratic personality' acts. Effective



secretariats act discreetly to keep the ‘delicate balance’ between the activism that is necessary to make a difference, and the risk of being perceived as ‘mis-behaving’ that undermines their own authority, thus limiting their means to shape the political process they serve (S. Bauer, 2006). Both the Bologna and ASEM secretariats face the challenge of getting every member country involved in ~~the~~ regional cooperation on an equal level, Bbut they are well aware that their authority is a ‘delicate good’ which can be seriously reduced if they are perceived as questioning specific member countries (interviews in November 2014 and May 2015).

In terms of specialised knowledge, several of the heads of both secretariats, have a PhD degree and intensive experience in higher education policy and international cooperation. The expertise possessed by the secretariats is a powerful source of their influence. However, as mentioned above, the paradox of the bureaucratic personality’s authority is that it makes them authoritative precisely by presenting them as not exercising authority but instead serving others. The greater the appearance of depoliticisation, the greater the authority of the expertise. Furthermore, the level of expertise and the kind of knowledge also shape the ways the secretariats behave and induce policy change, as a former staff shared her experiences:

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‘I personally tried to act [at meetings] in the capacity of the secretariat, but of course, as you know, your knowledge and experience influence the way you speak, and I am not free of that either. With time, I also got to know the audience, know who will react in what ways. Working at the secretariat, it was not difficult to know that’ (interview in May 2015).

Evidently, the secretariats possess not only technical knowledge but also normative and diplomatic, often tacit, knowledge to deal with the complex webs of connections and actors in these two political processes.

The process of drafting the Chair’s conclusions of the ASEM ministers’ meetings really matters, and it exemplifies how the ASEM education secretariat exercises their authority and exerts their influence on shaping the inter-regional policy arena. The key ASEM policy document is the Chair’s conclusions which state the ministers’ political viewpoints, the common goals, major achievements, new initiatives and activities. Similar to many other high-level conferences, there is a norm that the Chair’s conclusions are written prior to the

ministers' meetings. This practice of 'putting the cart before the horse' tends to give even greater authority ~~to~~in the hand of the secretariat who has the drafting capacity. By exercising this expert authority, the secretariat turns the ASEM ministers' meeting into reading aloud formal statements and disputing ~~over the~~ wordings while providing limited space for real dialogue and discussion of novel ideas. Drafting the Chair's conclusions demands ~~the~~ skills that ~~lay attend to~~in the detail, ~~the a~~ degree of familiarity with ~~the~~ language conventions, ~~the~~ tactics of interaction, and ~~the necessary~~ patience. It sometimes entails the tiring and highly frustrating detailed work of composing and organising phrases, and collating texts from some 50 member countries both before and at the senior officials' meetings. Many of hours of labour by the secretariat staff, the host country and the senior officials of member countries ~~went go~~into the preparation of various versions of the Chair's conclusions and the negotiations of each paragraph over a period of four months prior to the ministers' meeting. The texts and tones of voice were composed by the secretariat. As they work with the document at the levels of words and sentences, the secretariat sometimes uses their expert authority to make a difference in the ways 'their' ASEM education process is being implemented by adding phrases that will satisfy many, if not all member countries. For example:

'The Ministers [...] proposed to enhance mobility between Asia and Europe by intensifying promotional activities... *The ASEM education secretariat is asked to set up an expert group to explore the usefulness of a promotion strategy for the ASEM Education Area*' (ASEMME3, 2011, italics added).

The added sentence not only gives legitimacy to and reinforces the mandate ~~of~~the secretariat's action, but also draws support from the countries interested in the topic of mobility. Through their interactions with member countries and their involvement in the implementation of various activities, the secretariat knows precisely at what stage to intervene. They also have the expertise and information accumulated over time to point the member countries towards how to make the best use of the events and 'the rules of the game' (Beach, 2004). Hence, drafting is not only a source of authority for the Secretariat, but more importantly, it gives rise to a series of micro processes of interaction. In fact, the text itself may not be as important as the interactions ~~with~~between member countries in specific contexts.

This drafting process is an excellent example of how discourse practice (production, interpretation, consumption of text) mediates the relationship between socio-cultural practice (context) and text. As Fairclough argues, the nature of context influences the way a text is produced and interpreted, ~~in the sense of~~ and nature of what the discursive practices and conventions which are drawn from it and how they are articulated together. The nature of text production shapes the text and leaves 'traces' in its surface features whilst. ~~And~~ the nature of text consumption determines how the surface features of a text will be understood/interpreted (Fairclough, 1995). The understanding of how these three dimensions play out in practice, and what ideas and discourses are ~~operationalised~~ operationalized, will help explain how they shape outcomes.

In the context of forging a high-level strategic partnership in higher education between Asia and Europe, the secretariat takes steps in creating the joint ownership of ASEM projects and activities. Specifically, the Bonn-based secretariat attempts to ensure that both Asian and European countries subscribe to the specific discourses of higher education promoted by the Bologna Process. It does so through promoting the discourse of 'equal partnership' and 'equal participation' of small and large, new and old, Asian and European, member countries, for 'mutual benefits' and in a non-hierarchical regional order. This reflects in the processes of drafting ASEM policy texts.

In contrast to the Bologna Communiqués, which rarely mention any country names<sup>ix</sup>, the ASEM Chair's Conclusions focus on writing the country names into the text. Therefore, the drafts always leave 'blank spaces' as an invitation for the names to be filled in. For example, the early draft conclusions before the ASEM ministers' meeting in May 2011 reads as follows:

"...The topic of balanced mobility was presented by XXX. The second topic of quality assurance and recognition was introduced by the representative of XXX. The introductory remarks on the third topic of lifelong learning were given by XXX. XXX focused on the fourth topic of involving business and industry in education." (Draft Chair's Conclusions as of March 2011, personal communication)

The final conclusions fill the blank spaces with country names:

"...The topic of quality assurance and recognition was introduced by both the European Commission and the Republic of Korea. The second topic of engaging business and industry in education was presented by Malaysia. The introductory remarks on the third topic of balanced mobility were given by China. Vietnam focused on the fourth topic of lifelong learning including vocational education and training." (ASEMME3, 2011)

Such blank spaces can be seen as the secretariat's authoritative 'switches' that activate decision making processes of the senior officials who read the drafts. This action may involve finding justifications for their country's endorsement of a position or participation in a specific project and subsequently their proposal(s) to their ministers to attend the ASEM meeting. Often there are several drafts at different stages, and more and more country names get filled in as the draft comes closer to the final version. Once a country name is filled in, it also signals that the minister or deputy minister of the named countries will participate in the next meeting. These countries are not only active at the meeting, but often they take the lead in follow-up activities or they initiate new pilot projects. In essence, these blank spaces 'energise' the senior officials, spur their actions when reading and commenting on the drafts during the drafting/consultation process.

Another way of exerting influence is on the secretariat's drafting technique of formatting and numbering all paragraphs in the Chair's conclusions. The secretariat used both numbering and blank spaces in the draft conclusions. The 2013 Chair's conclusions were divided into different sections (e.g. A, B, C, D, such as C. Balanced Mobility in the passage below) corresponding to the four priorities of the agenda (figure 2 above). Such division creates room for member countries to express their interests, initiate ive projects and make their contribution to realising each agenda item. The continuous numbers signify the importance and the scope of a particular Minister's meeting (e.g. a total number of points discussed and projects agreed upon). Numbering is also a way to encourage the senior officials to refer to specific paragraphs when communicating with other groups of actors in the national (also international) contexts. These actors often quote the paragraphs and explain the texts to justify the relevance of their joint projects. In other words, this kind of drafting technique has the authority to facilitates interpretation and consumption of the text (Fairclough, 1995) and to formulate policy texts in ways that are easily to memorised, repeated and disseminated (Jessop, 2008).

18. Aware of the different regional credit systems for academic recognition, they emphasised the need to make these systems more transparent in order to facilitate recognition of study achievements abroad and to stimulate cross-border mobility. The Ministers welcomed the suggestion by [...], supported by Estonia, Belgium (French Community) Estonia, and Lithuania and Portugal to establish an expert group to discuss interregional credit transfer mechanisms among ASEM member countries. In

**Kommentar [on2]:** Interested countries should contact the ASEM Education Secretariat

22) Emphasised that work placements in higher education play a key role in enhancing graduate employability and endorsed the launch of an interregional ASEM Work Placement Pilot Programme that promotes practical experience and cross-cultural skills and competences of Asian students in Europe and European students in Asia. The Ministers asked the ASEM Education Secretariat to give organisational support to launch the programme and welcomed [...], [...], Belgium's (Flemish Community) and Germany's intention to take part in the pilot phase.

### C. Balanced Mobility

Kommentar [BC5]: Interested countries should contact the ASEM Education Secretariat

Kommentar [BC6]: Interested countries should contact the ASEM Education Secretariat

There is also a 'micro-politics' in the secretariat's usage of blank spaces. A closer look at the two passages above reveals different meaning. Is: in passage 18 of this draft version<sup>x</sup>, by using the 'blank space' the Secretariat was implicitly looking for an 'Asian' country that who can lead/coordinate a specific project while other (mentioned) European countries could confirm their 'support' role only. In passage 22, two blank spaces signalled that a minimum of two more (preferably Asian) countries was-were invited to ensure the equal partnership of an Asia-Europe joint project. Clearly, there were several previous versions prior to this stage because a number of country names were-are already filled in. This at also indicates se the level of interactions between the Secretariat and various member countries, particularly the senior officials, who spur the decision-making processes within their national contexts. These multi-level interactions, triggered by the secretariat, make-enable member countries to become active co-constructors of the ASEM education agenda and contribute to the thickening of Asia-Europe connectivity, thus-in turn shaping and constituting a new inter-regional policy arena.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has drawn on the theory of principal-agent relations to explore the authority of the Bologna and ASEM education secretariats in regional higher education policy-making. The paper argues that both secretariats act as were created as agents to facilitate the inter-governmental cooperation projects. In this sense they are not, but they are not passive; agents, rather they play an influential role and make contributions - albeit behind the scenes on most occasions - to different stages of the policy process, including agenda setting, norms and rules making, implementation and monitoring/evaluation. They have developed themselves into autonomous transnational actors precisely by performing their legitimated routine tasks, and serving the goals of enhancing higher education and regional cooperation.

In doing so, they exercise their rational authority which deploys relevant knowledge to create technical procedures determining how political goals should be pursued. Such authority can induce changes and compliance, not because the secretariats control the material power, but because they possess technical and normative tacit knowledge, and they present themselves as serving the member states' shared interests in a neutral and technocratic manner. A neutral appearance is not only a requirement but also an asset of the secretariats.

The case of these two Secretariats, ASEM and BFUG, study analyses have demonstrated that both ~~secretariats~~ operate with their own particularities that substantially affect their authority and the ways they exercise it. The paper also presented insights into the daily operations of the two secretariats and explained how the three sources of their authority: delegation, morality and expertise, were operationalised in practice. The secretariats share some common features, but they also differ greatly in the ways they exercise their authority. Although their broad mandates and functions look similar on paper, the informality and 'immaturity' of the ASEM education process seemed to allow its secretariat to act with greater levels of autonomy to shift~~ously in shifting~~ the agenda, ~~selecting~~ actors, ~~frameing~~ the interactions between them, and ~~shapeing~~ inter-regional higher education policies. ~~On the contrary,~~By way of contrast, the Bologna Process has structured and institutionalised its follow-up mechanism, thus turning the secretariat into an effective coordination tool of such a mechanism to monitor the performance of member countries.

The different governance structures and political objectives of the Bologna and ASEM education processes have profound impacts on how the secretariats perform their tasks and exercise their authority. In both cases, the authority over the flow of information and institutional memory may be constrained by the rotation of service. To a certain extent, the national interests and political context of the host countries may also affect the secretariats' authority.

In conclusion, the delegated authority may be constrained by states, but the moral and expert authority still enable the secretariats to act as autonomous policy actors on the regional policy-making arenas, thus contributing to region-making projects.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Grant Nr. 317452.

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## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> The ASEM education secretariat is the first and the only official and physical secretariat for ASEM ministerial sectoral cooperation, at the time of writing. For more details on the ASEM process' governance structure see (Dang, 2016b).

<sup>ii</sup> The seven countries admitted to the Bologna Process in 2003 are Albania, Andorra, Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Russian Federation, Serbia, and Holy See.

<sup>iii</sup> The six Bologna rotating secretariats were hosted by Norway (January 2004- June 2005), the United Kingdom (July 2005- June 2007), Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg - Benelux (July 2007- June 2010), Romania (July 2010 – June 2012), Armenia (July 2012- June 2015) and France (July 2015- June 2018).

<sup>iv</sup> BFUG Work Programme 2015-2018 retrieved from <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=391> in October 2016.

<sup>v</sup> This first ASEM report was named 'From Berlin 2008 via Hanoi 2009 to Copenhagen' - Status Report of the ASEM Education Secretariat for the Third Asia-Europe Meeting of Ministers for Education. A status report is to tell this is where we are and how we got here. It is different from a stocktaking report which focuses more on progress and achievements against pre-set targets.

<sup>vi</sup> At ASEM ME2 in 2009, the Danish Minister, as the host of the next meeting, announced three topics: innovation; entrepreneurial competences; and maths, information communication technology (ICT) and natural sciences. The minister was responsible for school education and adult education, but not universities and research. In 2010, he left for another position while his colleagues were preparing for ASEM ME3 with support from the new ASEM Education Secretariat.

<sup>vii</sup> ASEM member countries may have different ministries in charge of different levels of education, for example, higher education may be separate from school education and vocational education.

<sup>viii</sup> The set of indicators and the EHEA Implementation Reports, accessed in August 2017 at <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=21>

<sup>ix</sup> If the Bologna Communique mentions the name of a country it is unlikely to be a positive signal, rather it refers to something that needs to be followed up or check upon. For example, the 2005 Yerevan Communique mentions Belarus on page 3 in order to specify a monitoring process of the road map attached to Belarusian 'conditional' membership.

<sup>x</sup> There were several previous versions of the draft Chair's conclusions prior to this stage. One can judge a version by looking at the remaining blank space(s) and all the country names which were already filled in. This process indicates many interactions between the Secretariat and the member countries.