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2019

Cabanda, E., Tan, E. S., & Chou, M.-H. (2019). Higher education regionalism in Asia : what implications for Europe? *European Journal of Higher Education*, 9(1), 87-101.
doi:10.1080/21568235.2018.1561310

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/144544>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2018.1561310>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor and Francis in *European Journal of Higher Education* on 08 Jan 2019, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/21568235.2018.1561310>.

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in European Journal of Higher Education (8 January 2019), Early View <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/21568235.2018.1561310> (DOI: 10.1080/21568235.2018.1561310)

Higher Education Regionalism in Asia: What Implications for Europe?

Exequiel Cabanda^a, Ee Siong Tan^b and Meng-Hsuan Chou^{c*}

^{ab}*Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore;*

^c*Public Policy and Global Affairs Programme, Nanyang Technological university, Singapore and Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies, Princeton University, Princeton, USA*

Contact Meng-Hsuan Chou: hsuan.chou@cantab.net

Studies of regionalism—intra and comparative regionalism—have often used the European experience to explain the emergence and evolution of regionalisms in other parts of the world. This tendency in approaching the European experience as explanatory has permeated sector-specific developments. In this article, we consider the developments in higher education to examine the purported influence that Europe's Bologna Process has had on other regional initiatives. Taking the case of the Asian Universities Alliance (AUA), we delineate the narratives from the actors involved in this initiative to show how they initially perceived and conceptualised higher education cooperation in the Asia region. Applying Chou and Ravinet's (2015) higher education regionalism framework, we show how AUA actors designed higher education regionalism in Asia independent from Europe's influence. We conclude with the potential implications that AUA's emergence has for Europe, taking into consideration the growing influence of China in developing higher education regionalisms in Asia.

Keywords: Asian Universities Alliance, Bologna Process, China, geo-economics, higher education regionalism

Introduction: The Power of Europe in Other World Regions

Prominent among studies of regionalism has been the European experience, which has been used to compare and explain the design and operations of regional *modus operandi* elsewhere. For instance, scholars interested in Southeast Asia has argued that the development of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) could be seen as a product of European Union's (EU) 'model power' (Wong 2012, 670). Indeed, the assertion that 'Europe's history is a lesson for everybody' (Jokela 2016, 70) is not uncommon. Beyond the broader regional development, this way of thinking has also permeated sector-specific developments and analyses. For example, in the higher education sector, Europe's Bologna Process has been portrayed as a model that other regional actors look towards for how to 'do' regional higher education policy cooperation. Launched in 1999 outside of the EU's institutional framework, the Bologna Process seeks to establish a common space in Europe for higher education—the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)—through increased intra-regional mobility (student and faculty), degree recognition, and quality assurance (see Chou and Ravinet 2015; Ravinet 2008). The active promotion of the Bologna Process, inside and outside of Europe, has resulted in the commonplace assumption that the Bologna Process drives developments of 'common higher education areas' elsewhere around the world (Dang 2015; Knight 2012; Zgaga 2006; Zmas 2015). Meng-Hsuan Chou and Pauline Ravinet (2017) described this reasoning as the 'Bologna Process export thesis', which they challenged. In their study, Chou and Ravinet (2017) compared regional higher education policy cooperation in Europe and in Southeast Asia to demonstrate how these developments are part of broader regional processes, as well as responses to globalisation. In short, the purported influence of the European experience on higher education policy cooperation in Southeast Asia is put in question.

In this article, we lend further support to challenge the ‘Bologna Process export thesis’ by showing how parallel developments occurring in Asia have distinct regional characteristics. The rapid ‘rise of Asia’ provides an interesting case for Europe, not only in terms of trade but also in other policy areas such as higher education. Indeed, the advent of Asia as a region of highly competitive and dynamic universities, as reflected in several recent world university rankings,¹ is the result of massive investments across the region in the higher education sector (Paul and Long 2016). The concerted drive to establish ‘world-class’ universities is most evident in China, examples include state-level projects such as the ‘211 Project’ and ‘985 Programme’ for pushing selected universities towards achieving top global university rankings through substantial influx of financial resources (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008). Similar efforts to enhance the reputation of national universities could also be observed in other Asian countries like Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia. What these efforts have in common are the increase in state funding for research, in the push for international collaboration and recruitment of international students, and in growing participation in various forms of regional networks and initiatives (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008; Halliwell and Andersson 2014; Kuroda, Yuki, and Kang 2011; Paul and Long 2016). To what extent are these developments indigenous to the region or are they inspired by developments elsewhere, such as those from Europe? Alternatively, are these developments simply part of broader processes sweeping today’s higher education landscape around the world? Addressing these questions are essential to understanding contemporary developments in the higher education sector.

¹ One of the headlines launching the 2019 *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings reads ‘East closes in on West’ (Times Higher Education 2018), with China’s Tsinghua University being the prominent subject.

Taking the case of the Asian Universities Alliance (AUA), we examine whether this newest higher education regional initiative is indigenous, primarily a response to external developments (specifically, the Bologna Process), or part of the broader transformation of the global higher education landscape. To do so, we delineate the narratives from the actors involved in this initiative to show how they conceptualised higher education cooperation in the Asia region. The AUA is a regional higher education initiative created on 29 April 2017 and involves 15 universities from different sub-regional groupings in Asia. According to *Quacquarelli Symonds (QS)* University Ranking for Asia, six² of the 15 AUA member-universities belong to the top 20 universities in Asia, while the other nine³ are flagship universities in their respective countries. As a recent initiative, the AUA offers an interesting case to examine the relative influence of the Bologna Process on newer regional endeavours in the higher education sector. Given the prominence of the Bologna Process, we would expect to observe influence—either in terms of substantive content, methodology, or as reference points for current reform efforts. To draw out these observations, we apply Chou and Ravinet’s (2015) higher education regionalism framework to analyse the narratives surrounding the creation of the AUA.

² They are Tsinghua University (China), Peking University (China), Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (China), University of Tokyo (Japan), Seoul National University (South Korea), and National University of Singapore (Singapore).

³ Other members are Indian Institute of Technology (India), University of Indonesia (Indonesia), Chulalongkorn University (Thailand), University of Malaya (Malaysia), University of Colombo (Sri Lanka), University of Yangon (Myanmar), Nazarbayev University (Kazakhstan), United Arab Emirates University (UAE), and King Saud University (Saudi Arabia).

We structured the article as follows. We start by discussing Chou and Ravinet's (2015) higher education regionalism framework to highlight the utility of adopting a heuristic approach for analysing new sectoral developments at the regional level. In this section, we describe our research design and elaborate the data we analyse. Next, we turn towards the case of the AUA to show how higher education regionalism is thriving in Asia under the leadership of China through its 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative (also commonly referred to as the 'Belt-Road Initiative', or BRI). Using multiple sources, we describe how the actors designed the AUA initiative as a challenge to the 'West' in terms of the latter's perceived dominance in the world's higher education landscape. While one may construe such an observation as a response to the Bologna Process, and hence confirming its influence on the emergence of the AUA, we argue that this would be too simplistic. Indeed, the AUA participants' intense focus on the research dimension (versus the more commonplace issue such as quality assurance) indicates that the AUA initiative has more in common with the European Research Area initiative than with the Bologna Process (Chou 2014; De Elera 2006). We conclude with some remarks concerning the potential implications that the AUA initiative has for Europe in the higher education sector, particularly in light of China's visible interest in developing the region according to its imaginaries.

Studying Regional Higher Education Cooperation: Design, Approach, Method, and Data

There is a growing interest among policymakers and researchers alike of the potential value of the 'region'. Here, following Chou and Ravinet (2015, 367), we define a 'region' as consisting of 'visible geographical contour at the supranational level'. For policymakers, the 'region' offers an additional venue for governance and,

correspondingly, for scholars, the ‘region’ represents a governance layer that requires analysis if we are to understand developments and reforms in contemporary public policy. Given the growing interests in regional cooperation and the number of new, often overlapping, initiatives, we agree with Chou and Ravinet (*Ibid*) that a region should be defined inductively from the perspective of the participating actors. In this section, we describe our research design, how we intend to study the case of AUA as an instance of higher education regionalism in Asia, and our methods and data.

Research Design: An Exploration

Our research design is an exploratory case study. Specifically, we are interested in examining whether a recent higher education regional initiative in Asia—the Asian Universities Alliance—is an outcome of the successful export of Europe’s Bologna Process. The AUA is a particularly interesting case for testing the ‘Bologna Process export thesis’ given the growing competition between Asia and Europe in developing ‘world-class’ universities and in the performance of their universities in the world university rankings (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008). The popularity of the Bologna Process around the world has been well documented (see Zgaga 2003, 2006; Zmas 2015). If the AUA was not a direct response to the Bologna Process, then how can we account for its emergence and shape? To address this question, we turn to Chou and Ravinet’s (2015) higher education regionalism framework to structure and guide our analysis.

The Higher Education Regionalism Framework: A Sectoral Approach

In an earlier contribution to this journal, Chou and Ravinet (2016) argued that higher education is an interesting case for comparative regionalism, an emerging research

agenda in the fields of international relations and European studies. Specifically, they called for approaching comparative regionalism from the perspective of the policy sector (Chou and Ravinet 2016). In this case, ‘higher education regionalism’, which Chou and Ravinet (2015, 368) defined as:

a ‘political project of region creation’ involving at least some state authority (national, supranational, international), who in turn designates and delineates the world’s geographical region to which such activities extend, in the higher education policy sector.

According to Chou and Ravinet (2015), comparing policy sector developments between regions offer more insights into regional similarities and differences than the more commonplace comparisons of the overall structure of the regional organisations, and their decision-making processes. Their sectoral approach towards regionalism thus allows scholars to uncover regionalism in its various forms and identify regional cooperation in specific sectors or domains.

Their higher education regionalism framework calls attention to three broad dimensions: (1) the *constellations of actors* who are central and active in regional cooperation in the specific sector under observation, (2) the *institutional arrangements* adopted, agreed, or abandoned for this undertaking, and (3) the *ideas and principles* steering and embedded in these regional initiatives (Chou and Ravinet 2015, 369).

We operationalise Chou and Ravinet’s (2015) higher education regionalism framework by focusing first on mapping the constellation of actors involved in the creation of the AUA. From here, we zoom in on their public statements concerning the rationales behind why the AUA was essential to contemporary higher education developments in the Asia region. We weave these statements into a narrative, which is

significant because it reveals how AUA participants conceptualise higher education cooperation in their region (i.e. the narrative signals the ideas behind these developments). Moreover, the narrative highlights the ways in which AUA actors intend to stake out their niche in the global higher education landscape. Taking these first steps will enable us to offer a preliminary answer to the questions we raised earlier concerning whether the AUA was a response to Europe's Bologna Process.

Research Methods and Data

Our research methods are documentary analysis and process tracing to first identify the steps and statements concerning the creation of the AUA before presenting them in narrative form. At the time of this writing, the AUA has just completed its initial year of implementation and our data is thus limited; for instance, our study cannot speak to the substantive impact of the AUA on Asia or on the global higher education landscape. Specifically, our data consists of (a) press releases and statements from the websites of the 15 member-universities (17 articles in total), (b) documents from the Boao Forum for Asia⁴ (five documents: summaries of plenary speeches and session synopsis), and (c) news articles from local, national, and international newspapers and other online commentaries (23 articles in total).

We obtained our data from two databases—LexisNexis and Google News—some of the most reliable sources of this type of dataset that scholars use for textual

⁴ Early on in our analysis, we found that the Boao Forum for Asia is an important arena for discussions leading up to the creation of the AUA. The Boao Forum for Asia is a non-profit organisation that has strong connections with the Chinese government. Since 2001, it has hosted several high-level dialogs with influential leaders in Asia, including governments and private actors.

analysis (see Weaver and Bimber 2008). We used the following keywords in our searches: *Asian Universities Alliance*, *Boao Forum for Asia 2016*, *Boao Forum for Asia 2017*, *Boao Forum for Asia 2018*, and *Tsinghua University*. We selected these keywords based on our initial readings of the press releases. The period of our search is from 2016 and ending in 2018; this period is one year before and after the formation of the AUA and thus allows us to speak to the preparations that led up to the creation of the AUA (2016-2017) and the participating actors' first public statements concerning this new initiative (2017-2018).

In total, we retrieved 45 documents, and we manually coded them with the following keywords: *key actors*, *goals of the AUA*, *motivations of participation*, and *China's influence*. We selected these codes also from our initial reading of the press releases. Using data from news articles and press releases is an accepted practice in political science and public policy (see Woolley 2000) for constructing narratives in the absence of systematic source of data (e.g. policy documents and minutes, or opportunities for participation observation). At the time of this writing, the official AUA website is still under construction, and, to our knowledge, there are no published academic studies on the AUA. Our analysis presented in the next section thus constitutes one of the first steps towards understanding the creation of the AUA in the broader global higher education landscape.

Asian Universities Alliance: The New Kid on the Regional Block

Officially launched on 29 April 2017, the AUA is depicted as a groundbreaking regional initiative that seeks to enable the deep collaboration of 15 universities from different sub-regional geographical groupings in Asia on diverse issues concerning higher education. While other higher education cooperation in Asia are heavily

clustered in the Southeast or East Asia regions, the 15-member AUA provides representation from different universities in South, Central, and West Asia (the Middle East) (see Table 1). The AUA is the first of its kind considering the recent history of higher education cooperation in the Asian region. Indeed, the involvement of universities representing different sub-regions of Asia invokes an imagery of Asia from an ancient time, which is, as we shall see, intended.

[Table 1 about here]

The AUA has four stated objectives. First, to promote the mobility of students, scholars, and staff between the participating member states. Second, to strengthen research collaboration and joint innovation between their universities and research labs. Third, to establish high-level dialogs and forums for discussing higher education strategies and policies. Fourth, to compile and publish annual reports on higher education in Asia (Asian Universities Alliance 2017). What is generally distinctive about the AUA objectives in comparison to existing regional higher education initiatives and activities in the Asia region is the explicit emphasis on the research dimension as a collective goal. The general tendency of bilateral and region-wide cooperation in the higher education sector has been geared towards enabling mobility and quality assurance issues (see Neubauer and Gomes 2017; Umemiya 2008). By contrast, the AUA members' focus on the research dimension reveals their intention of eventually boosting 'Asia's position' in the global research and innovation landscape (Tsinghua University 2017).

Looking at AUA's membership composition in Table 1, the presence of the state authority appears to be minimum. Our analysis below reveals a different scenario in practice. The Chinese political leaders were active in the establishment of the AUA. For

instance, China's Vice Premier, Liu Yandong, inaugurated the official launch of the AUA at Tsinghua University. Chinese government officials were also involved in designing the set-up of the AUA, recruiting member-universities from the broader Asia region, providing research funding support, and outlining AUA's policy goals. The role of Chinese political leadership cannot be overemphasised. We begin our case analysis of the AUA by discussing the role that China has played in launching the initiative, the general rationale behind AUA's creation, and how the member-university representatives portray the alliance in the broader global higher education context.

Establishing the AUA: China in the Driver's Seat

The origin of the AUA is China's 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) initiative. Launched in 2013, the OBOR initiative is China's flagship foreign policy project. Organised under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, the OBOR combines two geographical and sectoral domains based on the historical routes of the fabled 'Silk Road': (1) the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (involving Central Asia and Europe), and (2) the 'Maritime Silk Road of the 21st Century' (involving Southeast, South, and North Asia). China is to act as the main hub of the OBOR, with the connections to the various countries and regions being the OBOR spokes (Yu 2017, 353). The OBOR initiative embodies China's ambition to display its supposed unprecedented influence on the world's economic and political affairs. The mechanism of China's ambition is the introduction of new norms in commerce and trade and, through the AUA initiative, in higher education in the Asia region. Examining the narrative surrounding AUA's creation thus allows us to begin seeing how geo-economic power could be generated outside of the commerce and trade domains.

In July 2016, China's Ministry of Education (MOE) issued an 'Education Action Plan for the Belt and Road Initiative' that highlighted the important role of higher education in these developments. Specifically, higher education was depicted as an avenue that 'can provide talent to make the Initiative [OBOR] a success (MOE China 2016). According to the Action Plan, China would commit more resources to create and conclude cooperation agreements with countries situated in the historical routes of the 'Silk Road'. Indeed, China declared that it was 'willing to shoulder as many responsibilities and honour as many commitments as possible, and to make a greater contribution to the development of education in the region' (MOE China 2016). These proclamations signal China's intent to extend its geo-economic, and by implication political, reach not only through trade and infrastructures, but also through higher education. As William Kirby of Harvard University's China Studies points out, 'In infrastructure [China] is leading the world, in higher education it surely has that capacity as well' (quoted in Sharma 2018). Similarly, Marijk van der Wende of Utrecht University, who is coordinating a research consortium studying OBOR's implications, comments, 'The size of China's higher education and R&D system, and the speed at which it develops both of these to global standards, will affect that of its regional partners as well as that of its global competitors' (quoted in Sharma 2018).

Tsinghua University, China's premier public university, was tasked to organise the recruitment of member-universities for this new higher education regional initiative. In early September 2016, Tsinghua University hosted a meeting in Beijing for representatives from twelve prominent universities in Asia, the topic of discussion was the constitution of this higher education initiative. The September meeting resulted in the approval and adoption of AUA's constitution. In the months that follow, Tsinghua University leaders actively sought membership from specific universities whose leaders

were not able to attend the September meeting. For instance, Tsinghua University delegates visited the University of Yangon (Myanmar) in October 2016 to extend membership invitation on behalf of the alliance. During the meeting, the four-member delegation from Tsinghua University headed by Director Fang Yanghua explained how the representatives of member-universities drafted the AUA constitution (Yin Myo 2017). In terms of funding, Tsinghua University contributed US\$1.5 million to jumpstart AUA's operation. This funding contribution designates Tsinghua University as the largest financial contributor to the AUA; other member-universities contributed US\$5,000 each (annual membership fee). While Tsinghua University led the actual creation of the AUA, its leaders did so in tandem with China's political leaders—as can be seen in the promotion of the AUA in subsequent international meetings.

The March 2017 Boao Forum for Asia, a Chinese-led high-level meeting of the world's business leaders, governments, and academics, served as the launching pad for presenting the AUA to the world. In a panel discussion at the session entitled 'Future of Education', Qiu Yong, President of Tsinghua University introduced AUA as a key initiative in shaping the education of tomorrow. This panel took place before the formal launch of the AUA on 29 April 2017. According to Yong, 'openness' would characterise the future of Asian universities amidst globalisation, in which AUA intends to play a significant role in 'exploring the common values of Asia and increasing the global discourse power of Asian universities' (Boao Forum for Asia Institute 2017, 3). In her speech inaugurating the AUA a month later, Vice Premier Liu stressed that the AUA 'will make a big difference to the prosperity and the cultural exchange within the region (quoted in Ying 2017) and contribute 'Asian wisdom to resolve regional and global problems' (quoted in Sharma 2017).

The ‘openness’ theme is a topic that the Chinese political leaders have consistently mentioned throughout their contributions at the Boao Forums for Asia. For instance, at the 2016 meeting, China’s Premier Li Keqiang emphasised the needs for ‘openness and inclusiveness’ in the Asian region in his keynote. Specifically, he highlighted the alignment of the OBOR initiative with the strategies of participating countries and regional organisations, and the building of new cooperation platforms to promote innovation as important strategies that the Asian countries should adopt to address the world’s diverse challenges (Li 2016). At the 2018 meeting, China’s President Xi Jinping encouraged cooperation and community-building in Asia and the world as part of his keynote speech entitled ‘Openness for Greater Prosperity, Innovation for a Better Future’. He specifically mentioned how China would take a lead in creating new cooperation and to play an active role in reforming the global governance system (Boao Forum for Asia Institute 2018).

How are we to understand this theme of ‘openness’ in the broader context of establishing the AUA? Observers have commented on how the AUA initiative is an attempt by Chinese leaders to lessen China’s dependence on the advanced technology coming from the ‘West’. Specifically, by seeking collaboration with leading universities in the wider Asia region in the areas of research and innovation, China is portrayed as aspiring to be the world’s leader in technological development. We could thus interpret the theme of ‘openness’ in at least two ways. First, we could understand it as an appeal to other leading universities in the Asia region to be ‘open’ and engage with or join China’s initiatives, instead of being closed and rejecting China’s advances. By implication, ‘openness’ in this instance could also be seen as the desired state of knowledge sharing (i.e. all partners should be ‘open’ and share their insights so that their collective knowledge would lead to innovation). Second, as we shall elaborate

below, ‘openness’ could be interpreted as a declaration of independence from the supposed ‘Western’ dominance in the fields of higher education, research, and innovation. Put differently, these fields need to be ‘open’ for alternative values and practices that are distinctly non-Western, i.e. ‘Asian’.

Designing AUA: Promoting the ‘East’ by Challenging the ‘West’

As an extension of China’s OBOR initiative, the AUA is designed to strengthen the role of Asian universities in the global higher education landscape, specifically by influencing higher education developments in non-Asian countries and regions. In a well cited article, Simon Marginson (2011, 588) elaborates how the ‘West’ perceives the emerging Asian higher education systems: as both a threat for ‘global primacy and a fecund source of options for collaboration’. This tension is coming to the fore with the rise of Asia, and the rise of China in particular (Deyo 1987; Ikenberry 2008), as one of the most dynamic regions in the world in terms of trade (investments), finance, and infrastructure. Governments in Asia, with Chinese leaders launching more large scale initiatives in recent years, have turned towards huge public investments in higher education and research to complement and sustain this growth (Deem, Mok, and Lucas 2008). Indeed, numerous initiatives have been introduced in Asia to lure back their nationals from abroad and attract foreign talents to contribute to the growing knowledge economies in the region (Ortiga et al. 2018; Wang et al. 2018). As Tan Eng Chye, President of the National University of Singapore, a founding member of the AUA, puts it:

The alliance is a timely one where Asia is on the rise and we need to build upon the momentum. Higher education will play an increasingly important role in future Asian economies and there are rising expectations for the universities to contribute

more of enhancing national growth and competitiveness, promote entrepreneurship and innovation, and address major societal changes. (quoted in Marsh 2017)

Gerard Postiglione of the University of Hong Kong, and adviser to Tsinghua University on the setting up of the AUA, shares the same observation concerning the economic implications of the alliance:

There is a need to get a handle on the rapid economic changes that are already happening. There is going to be quite a lot of labour mobility. And this is a preparation for that. This is a timely alliance. It should have started earlier. (quoted Sharma 2017)

Speaking on behalf of his university, Mohamed Albaili, the Vice Chancellor of the United Arab Emirates University, also emphasized the ‘growth’ dimension:

As the nation’s first university we are honored to be part of this new pan-Asian alliance of fifteen flagship institutions, which will harness and develop the potential for research and productivity in a region poised for continued social, innovative and economic growth. (quoted in UAEU 2017)

The mechanism through which the AUA member-universities intend to sustain and improve the many ‘growths’ is ‘research and innovation’. Indeed, research and innovation are the keys through which the AUA seeks to promote and improve the competitiveness of Asian universities. Elaborating on how this is to be done, Prasanna Majundar, Deputy Director of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay, offers the following suggestion:

What we would look for is strong research groups to be build up across these universities. If we have strength to pool universities together, the best minds from both sides, each with their own niche expertise to contribute and then (jointly) bid for research proposals. (quoted in Dasgupta 2017)

Given that the AUA is very much at an early stage of implementation, it is impossible to speak about whether this focus on research collaboration would yield the desired result of Asian prominence on the global higher education landscape. That said, the ambiguity of future outcomes certainly did not diminish the enthusiasm of AUA participants who saw this initiative as carrying the flag for a non-Western voice in today's higher education landscape. Postiglione puts it best when he refers to the AUA as the first step towards eradicating the 'minoritisation' of Asian higher education institutions in contemporary university cooperation:

The thinking behind the new consortium is that it is time to rebalance international university consortia which tend to be largely focused on other parts of the world. There are few university consortia that are mainly Asian, and this is an attempt at setting up an indigenous alliance. Asian university presidents are often together with Western university presidents (within consortia) and they are in a minority. It is time to put a stop to this 'minoritisation', even if it is not intentional. (quoted in Sharma 2017)

Postiglione's comment illuminates the asymmetrical interdependence that universities of the 'East' perceive in their alliances with those in the 'West'. Indeed, it is clear that the AUA member-universities are integrated in the global higher education landscape through the many alliances involving universities in the 'West', but the comments from AUA participants suggest that the good practices of Asian universities are overshadowed or absorbed under the powerful 'Western' brand of higher education. The AUA initiative is an attempt to give the 'Asian / Eastern' brand of higher education a voice in the world. President Yong of Tsinghua University describes this attempt in more daring terms:

In the world, there should not be only one development model for all the universities. Through exchange and cooperation, I am sure the global higher

education community will benefit from the unique educational ideas of Asian universities. (quoted in Yang 2018)

Higher education should not have only one voice. Western education is also successful, but I do believe that there are Eastern educational philosophy and heritage that deserves to be cherished also. (quoted in Marsh 2017)

When weaved together, these statements present a narrative of an Asia on the rise, seeking to assert its position on the global higher education stage through research intensification and collaboration with likeminded partners sharing a set of supposed common values. While facilitating mobility between member-universities is one of AUA's central objectives, the participants placed the emphasis on a thriving research and innovation scene as the true focus of their joint undertaking. An extension of China's broader OBOR initiative, the AUA is an indigenous initiative from the region with global ambitions. For AUA participants, the initiative is not a direct response to Europe's Bologna Process. Yet, at the same time, the creation of the AUA does point to the significance of the region as providing an additional layer of governance in the higher education sector. As we shall discuss in the next section, we could see AUA as an instance of the types of changes currently sweeping the global higher education landscape—developments that should be further examined.

Conclusion: The Rise of Asian Higher Education Regionalism and Implications for Europe

We set out in this article to examine whether the Asian Universities Alliance was an indigenous undertaking, a response to higher education regionalism in Europe (i.e. the Bologna Process), or part of the general transformation that the contemporary global higher education landscape is undergoing. Studying China's leading role in this process

and the public statements made by AUA designers and member-universities, we found that this initiative is an extension of China's OBOR initiative in the higher education sector. The Asian Universities Alliance is indeed indigenous to the region and embodies the participants' ambition to be prominent on the global higher education stage. At the same time, the resources devoted to the operations of AUA should remind us that ambitions should be gauged by the budget available for achieving the proclaimed goals. Would other member-universities match Tsinghua University's contribution or would AUA's operations be sustained primarily by China's asymmetrical support? What we may conclude at this point is that the rise of Asia, and China in particular, has shown that countries and institutions in the 'East' are no longer content (if they ever were) to be passive observers of global affairs supposedly decided by countries in the 'West'. Therefore, looking more closely at China, we may approach AUA as an instance of this country seeking to shore up its geo-economic advantage by anchoring its higher education system in an Asian trans-regional alliance consisting of flagship universities.

What then are the implications for Europe's Bologna Process? Taking into consideration China's involvement in developing higher education regionalisms⁵ in Asia, we could begin discussing some implications in the following way. To start with, the growing ubiquity of higher education regionalism initiatives in other world regions would suggest that it is essential to think seriously about the roles that the Bologna Process plays in the global higher education landscape. The initial conceptualisation of

⁵ The Asian Universities Alliance is certainly not the only regional higher education initiative that China has forged in recent years within the OBOR framework. For instance, China is also involved in the University Alliance of the Silk Road (2015), which includes several universities from France, Italy, UK, Poland, and Croatia, and the Sino-Russian Comprehensive University Alliance (2017).

the Bologna Process may be more intra-regional (e.g. how to facilitate mobility and enable degree recognition within Europe). The growing presence now of higher education regionalisms elsewhere implies that the ‘external dimension’ of the Bologna Process is no longer an asymmetrical configuration of ‘Bologna promoters’ and individual partner-countries (an image captured by the ‘Bologna Process export thesis’). Indeed, the interface is now more along the line of regional groupings (e.g. ‘Bologna promoters’ and ‘AUA members’). In these instances, who speaks on behalf of the Bologna members? What is the Bologna message and how does the interaction take place? In the case of the AUA, it is clear that the Chinese leaders and alliance member-universities organised the alliance as an economically driven initiative: through AUA, member-universities would generate cutting-edge research to boost, *inter alia*, economic growth in the Asia region. Is the AUA’s operational logic compatible with the rationale of the Bologna Process? There are no clear answers to any of the above questions, especially in light of new proposals⁶ circulating in Europe, but these questions do point to the challenge of coherence and the need to coordinate responses.

We may identify another set of implications by considering the limitations of our research design and findings. Our research is exploratory, and the findings are restricted to the data available during the first year of implementing the AUA. It is clear that the AUA statements are crafted and thus may not be revealing of the underlying tensions between the participants one often finds through one-on-one off-the-record

⁶ For instance, French President Macron’s call in 2017 for the creation of ‘European Universities Network’ and the ensuing responses. In our research, we did not identify any coherent European response to the creation of the AUA. One possible explanation may be that European actors are more preoccupied with the development of ‘European Universities Network’ than another new regional alliance in Asia.

interviews with the policy actors (if one can gain access), or the existence and breadth of the ‘capability-expectations gap’. For instance, it may very well be that by pinning high aspirations to the AUA initiative, China and participating member-universities are simply speaking the universal language of ‘knowledge economy’ when doing regional higher education cooperation. If that is indeed the case, we may ask: how are we to make sense of the proliferation of region-wide university alliances in contemporary higher education? To what purpose do they serve? How do we account for multiple alliance memberships a university may have at any given point? Are multiple alliance memberships indicative of how ‘embedded’ a university is in the global higher education landscape? Or are these regional partnerships merely reflecting the ‘race for more’ in doing higher education cooperation today? If anything, our study on the creation of the Asian Universities Alliance is an invitation for those interested in the Bologna Process, and higher education regionalisms around the world, to think more reflectively about the role that the ‘region’ plays in articulating the relationship between competition and cooperation in contemporary higher education. While ‘competition and cooperation’ may suggest ‘winners and losers’, this ‘dependency’ perspective masks the growing ‘interdependence’ that is permeating in today’s higher education sector. In short, it is far more interesting to parse out the relationship regional higher education initiatives weave than to assume that the rise of one alliance means the demise of another.

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Table 1: AUA member-universities and representatives

Member Universities	Country	Sub-Region of Asia	Key Actors
1. Tsinghua University	China	East	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China's Vice Premier, Liu Yandong China's Premier Li Keqiang China's President Xi Jinping Prof. Qiu Yong, President, Tsinghua University President Assoc. Prof. Zhang Chuanjie, Deputy Director, International Cooperation and Exchange Office, Tsinghua University Mr. Fang Yanghua, Director, Tsinghua University Not indicated
2. Peking University			
3. Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST)			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prof. Tony Chan, President, HKUST Prof. Gerard Postiglione, Education Department, HKUST, and adviser to Tsinghua University for establishing the AUA
4. University of Tokyo	Japan		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not indicated
5. Seoul National University	South Korea		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not indicated
6. National University of Singapore (NUS)	Singapore	Southeast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prof. Tan Eng Chye, Deputy President and Provost, NUS
7. Chulalongkorn University	Thailand		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prof. Bundhit Eua-arporn, President, Chulalongkorn University
8. University of Malaya	Malaysia		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prof. Abdul Rahim Hashim, Vice Chancellor, University of Malaya
9. University of Yangon	Myanmar		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dr. Pho Kaung, Rector, University of Yangon Dr. Omar Kyaw, Pro-Rector, University of Yangon Not indicated
10. University of Indonesia	Indonesia		
11. Indian Institute of Technology (IIT)- Bombay	India	South	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prof. Prasanna M. Mujumdar, Deputy Director, IIT- Bombay
12. University of Colombo	Sri Lanka		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not indicated
13. Nazarbayev University	Kazakhstan	Central	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not indicated
14. United Arab Emirates University (UAEU)	United Arab Emirates	West (Middle East)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professor Mohamed Albaili, Vice Chancellor, UAEU
15. King Saud University	Saudi Arabia		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not indicated

Source: Compilation by authors