Higher education can be a politically sensitive issue as universities historically have played a crucial role in nation and state-building by supplying states with manpower, building national consciousness and identity, integrating national elites, and providing research capacity for development (Olsen and Maassen, 2007). Transnational cooperation in this policy field has been difficult, yet in recent decades, European universities and other institutions providing higher education have begun in parallel to reform their program structures and engaged in setting up quality assurance systems. Most recently, these developments can be connected to the so-called Bologna Process, whose name is derived from the Bologna Declaration drafted and adopted by European education ministers. The Bologna Process marks the first higher education policy harmonization effort on a European scale. Higher education policies were traditionally subsumed under the principle of subsidiarity, leaving the European Union (EU) member states and their constituent parts full authority over the field. Interestingly, although Europe-wide cooperation in the field of higher education was once inconceivable, the extant literature on higher education reform pays little consideration to the fact that the European education ministers agreed so quickly on a common framework for reforming program structures as well as quality assurance mechanisms. The question then arises why harmonization of European higher education structures has been viewed as desirable all of a sudden? Due to the widely held belief that science-based innovation is the engine of economic development and growth, political leaders have come to perceive universities as crucial constituents in the transformation into a knowledge-based economy and society, and as key elements in social, labor market, and overall economic policy. The Bologna Process is widely...
regarded as a common attempt to solve problems related to demographic changes, sluggish economic growth, and the impact of globalization: “[C]ountries adhered to the Bologna Process [first] to solve long-term problems that they had failed to resolve because of internal resistance” (Charlier, 2008, p. 107) and “acted as a catalyst for European-wide action to address [these] new international paradigms regarding higher education” (Hoareau, 2011, p. 539). This might explain the high degree of commitment to the process demonstrated by participating countries (see Stocktaking Report, Bologna Follow-Up group (BFUG) 2009), even though it relies completely on voluntary arrangements. The Bologna Process has been so successful because it “enabled signatory countries not only to strengthen the attractiveness of their universities but also to help resolve strictly national problems that they had not addressed effectively” (Charlier and Croché, 2008, p. 10).

This chapter provides an overview of the Bologna Process, its development, actors, and objectives. This overview is accompanied by figures visualizing the main characteristics of the Bologna Process. Further, it is demonstrated how the Bologna Process evolved into a multi-actor multi-purpose network whose governance mechanisms have been copied all around the globe (see Vögtle and Martens, 2014). This account is supplemented by giving reference to research projects in relation to the Bologna Process. In the following, we will provide an understanding of the nature of the Bologna Process by sketching out its stages of development and objectives as well as the actors involved at various levels. Thereby, we provide arguments for the features of the Bologna Process that enable it to be so successful.

2.1 Members and stages of development

Two events, culminating in declarations and conventions, paved the way for the Bologna Declaration in 1999 and its broad acceptance in European countries. The first is the Lisbon Recognition Convention in 1997, a joint convention of the Council of Europe (CoE) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). It is a multi-lateral legal framework addressing the recognition of studies, certificates, diplomas and degrees obtained in countries of the European region, and their recognition by other signatory parties to this convention (UNESCO 1997). The central precept of the convention stipulates that degrees and periods of study must be recognized unless substantial differences can be proved by the institution that is charged with recognition. Countries partaking in the Bologna Process have been