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## THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

**ABSTRACT.** Higher education research is closely linked to the debates on higher education policy and practice. It provides the information basis for decisions about the future of higher education. As the themes of the public debate on problems and reform needs in higher education change quickly, higher education research has to anticipate future problems and themes of debates in order to develop concepts and to generate knowledge well in advance. Future-conscious higher education research might aim to identify likely future changes in thematic areas which are already in the limelight of public attention, as trends in the areas of expansion of higher education, diversification of structures of the higher education system, system steering and institutional management as well as internationalisation and globalisation suggest. Moreover, future-conscious higher education research should try to identify thematic areas not frequently discussed at present but likely to be major issues in the future. For example, professionalisation of higher education in terms of the emergence and expansion of new administrative and service professions in higher education institutions might have far-reaching implications in the future and is worth to be paid attention by higher education researchers.

### INTRODUCTION

Social sciences, under public pressure of the widespread notion that the natural sciences are close to the ideal of good systematic knowledge, certainly would gain respect if they became more successful in predicting future developments. In this framework, social sciences are expected to provide foresight knowledge as regards the likely future impacts of measures taken today. Certainly, we take for granted that there are always surprises in social settings. We note break-through innovations or wars. And in turn, we are often disappointed about that kind of futurology which does not speculate about surprising future scenarios, but rather confines itself to non-inspiring forecasts which are based on extrapolations of the past into the future. But irrespective of the known risks and weaknesses of social forecasts, social sciences have to address the future, because their practical relevance rests on shaping the conditions for the future. This is obviously true for higher education research, an area of research which is closely intertwined with policy and practice (cf. Kogan 2000; Teichler & Sadlak 2000), because higher education provides knowledge to students



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today who will make use of it in the coming three or even four decades, and it might generate new knowledge with potentials to shape the world of tomorrow.

Social sciences have to be forward-looking for a second reason. The time-span needed for substantial research activities – from the first drafting of concepts and the acquisition of funds to the final analysis and the dissemination of results – might be several years. If the social sciences want to contribute to the understanding of social phenomena that are in the forefront of concern, debates and search for solution, they have to anticipate future debates. Higher education research certainly has to predict key issues of debates about five years in advance, because individual higher education issues tend to be in forefront of debate and of readiness for action only for a period of about five to ten years (cf. Teichler 1996). If higher education research starts to address a problem only at the time when it is hotly debated, it delivers results at a time when the public is not interested anymore. If, however, future debates are anticipated about five years in advance, systematic knowledge might be delivered at a time when it has a chance to be taken up.

The start of a new century and even a new millennium has sparked off a vast number of conferences and publications about the future of higher education from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s. This provides “food for thought” about possible futures of higher education research as well.

The aim of this contribution is to discuss possible futures of higher education that might be worth addressing by higher education research today. Such a future-conscious planning of higher education research ensures that the findings and interpretations of higher education research will contribute in the near future to the identification of problems and to the search for higher education reforms.

#### EXPANSION

One of the most popular themes of trend analyses and forecasts – not only around the year 2000, but also in the preceding decades – was that of the student enrolment figures and the impacts of enrolment growth. Entry rates in higher education in the OECD member countries were only about 10% around 1960; at the end of the 20th century, however, entry rates in tertiary education eventually reached about 45% and graduation rates were on the level of 25% on average (see OECD 2001).

Many experts predict a continuous growth towards “universal higher education” or a “post-massification” era of higher education. This seems to

be a forecast without risk – notably, because the enrolment ratios continue to vary substantially among the economically advanced countries – which suggests, if certain pressures for convergence are taken for granted, that enrolment is likely to grow substantially in countries still characterised by relatively low enrolment rates. In various countries, enrolment in higher education has reached such a high level that formulations such as “The Forgotten Half” were employed recently in addressing the employment and social situation of persons without tertiary education degrees. There are indications that in some countries – e.g. Norway, Finland and the United States – preparation for all occupations “above” manual skilled labour is on the way to be provided by higher education and that an enrolment rate of about 70% of the corresponding age group is accepted as appropriate.

The trend towards increasing enrolment rates and growing student numbers is made known through the collection of national statistical data by UNESCO, OECD and EUROSTAT. The annual OECD analysis of the educational “indicators” published with the title “Education at a Glance” became the source most frequently referred to. Unfortunately, the interesting data basis is not often taken as a starting point for further analysis.

We suggest that the continuous rise of student numbers in economically advanced countries calls for analyses of the changes associated with this trend – within higher education and beyond. Looking at higher education itself, first, one could ask about the interrelationships between this issue of expansion to other issues in the forefront of the debate of higher education. For example, to what extent and in which way reform of curricula – as well as teaching and learning and also reforms of steering, governance and funding of higher education – are driven by “pressures” of the growth of student numbers (see for example OECD 1998; Arimoto 1997).

Second, we have to explore the consequences for the world of work and other spheres of life, if the majority of the population is college-trained. What will be the characteristics of a highly educated society around 2010? Will all new persons professionally active in middle-level jobs know foreign languages, understand the basics of academic theory, methods and knowledge, and will they be trained both to perform according to established rules as well as to call into question these rules constantly? We assume that such a high proportion of higher education-trained graduates opens up opportunities for decentralisation of responsibilities, dispersed innovation and new modes of division of labour in an unprecedented scale, but we also know that concerns about “mismatch” and “over-education” have never faded completely.

## DIVERSIFICATION

Since the expansion of higher education began to occupy the minds of experts in economically advanced countries in the 1960s and 1970s, the issue of diversification of higher education was closely linked to that of expansion. System theory suggests that expanding systems are likely to diversify. And when the notion spread that “mass higher education” was emerging, the American higher education researcher Martin Trow (1974) put forward one of the most influential developmental theories of higher education. Trow suggested that higher education was likely to diversify in the process of expansion of higher education in order to protect the traditional functions of “elite higher education” amidst “mass higher education” and subsequently also those of “mass higher education” when “universal higher education” was realised.

Subsequent analysis showed that the patterns of institutions and course programmes in higher education followed less consistently a universal trend than Trow’s model initially suggested (see Trow 1979; Teichler 1988; van Vught 1996). This notwithstanding, most experts agree that higher education tends to diversify in the process of expansion of higher education. Major controversies, however, focus on the question whether such a trend towards increasing diversity of higher education is desirable or irreversible, or whether, in contrast, higher education policies ought to (and actually) have a chance to strive for a less diverse system, e.g. for a certain minimum of quality or for a certain degree of homogeneity of the quality level of higher education. Also, academic disciplines vary to the extent to which they encourage or at least tolerate a diversity of academic approaches or to the extent they emphasise such a high disciplinary homogeneity, that higher education can vary considerably only in the quality level but cannot be genuinely diverse as far as the substantive profiles are concerned. By and large, there is agreement among experts that the issue of diversification of higher education will continue to be among the major issues in future debates about the development of higher education systems. Six causes are frequently named for this:

- In the continuous process of expansion, higher education aims to respond to the growing diversity of students in terms of motives, talents and job perspectives.
- The growing importance of life-long learning calls for reconsideration of the role of higher education. Institutions of higher education tend to interpret these challenges differently, and this is likely to persist.

- The growing pressure for relevance of teaching and research is differently interpreted and absorbed by individual higher education institutions and programmes.
- The tensions between the research and teaching functions of higher education continue to grow and are likely to lead to diverse modes of accommodation.
- Changing steering policies of national governments and growing managerial responsibilities of the individual higher education institutions call more strongly than in the past for choices on the part of individual institutions as far as their individual profiles are concerned. The issue of the strengths and weaknesses of diversity is more strongly on the agenda. In the past, it was often assumed that a weaker state control was likely to increase the diversity among higher education institutions (see, for example, Clark 1976). In recent years, however, it has been suggested that institutions of higher education also might opt for very similar policies and to have similar profiles in mind (cf. the arguments presented by Huisman et al. 2002).
- The rapidly spreading belief that higher education institutions to an increasing degree have to consider themselves as actors on a globalising higher education market reinforces the issue named above. Will imitation behaviour prevail, or will a search for diverse options turn out to be viable?

Available analyses show that higher education might diversify structurally according to different dimensions:

- types of institutions and programmes,
- levels of degrees,
- substantive profiles of institutions and programmes of the same type (horizontal diversification), and
- ranks of reputation and quality of the institutions and programmes of the same type (vertical diversification) (cf. Teichler 1998).

We also know that the majority of actors and experts predict a growing diversification. However, the views continue to vary strongly between countries as regards the kinds and the extent to which diversification is likely and desirable. However, available information does not provide clear evidence whether diversity within national systems of higher education is increasing.

Higher education researchers are inclined to strive for minute measures of the differences existing. We owe this attitude to our faith into the virtue of exact measurement. However, we observe that the perceptions and interpretations of the actors and “stakeholders” rather seem to call for

somewhat crude measures on the basis of a few key descriptors of diversity. On the one hand, most of the actors within the higher education systems – and most of the users of its services – are interested in knowing just the major differences existing. On the other hand, minute measures of the distinctions are costly, controversial as far as their validity is concerned, difficult to understand and likely to change too quickly to be understood by the public. If at all, minute measures are appreciated as an information base for internal purposes of the higher education system (e.g. stimulus for competition and differential resource allocation), but not considered relevant by most students, employers and politicians. The more minute measures are, the more they tend to underscore differences. Whether we call a higher education system relatively homogeneous or, for example, highly stratified might be determined by the measures we employ. If higher education research does not want to be confined by the inner logic of data, it has to find ways to analyse the social relevance of differences measured: to what extent does the difference between a 12th position and a 26th position in a research ranking of departments in a given discipline actually matter for the quality of research to be expected in the future? How important are the differences between graduates' careers according to university for students' choice of a university? As far as the crude key descriptors of the diversity of higher education are concerned, we noted a major preoccupation with three descriptors in the past:

- types of higher education institutions,
- length of study and levels degrees closely associated with a certain length of study, and
- the name of individual top universities.

In the past, it seemed justified to assume that the former two descriptors are bound to lose relevance and the name of the individual institution gains relevance in the process of increasing diversification. And the establishment of “league tables” was increasingly advocated as an information base both for informed consumer behaviour and as a stimulus for the higher education institutions in an increasing competitive world of higher education. Higher education research, however, cannot extrapolate past trends naively. One has to ask whether the trends of the past seem to persist unchallenged or whether there are indicators of major counter-vailing factors and trends. At least two observations suggest that rank differences between individual universities do not gain relevance without contest.

First, the movement to establish a similar stage structure of higher education programmes and degrees in Europe (the so-called “Bologna process”) and the efforts made to facilitate recognition of internationally

mobile students certainly could not have gained such a popularity, if the persons involved were convinced that differences in the reputation and quality between individual universities were the overwhelmingly strong descriptors of the structure of higher education systems. Length of study continues to “matter” strongly and to underscore the limited weight of the differences between programmes of the same length in most of the cases.

Second, the current debates on diversification of the higher education institutions, departments and programmes might be viewed as outmoded in the new future. A quality rating according to institutional unit might have been justified at a time when the quality of research could be influenced strongly by local conditions of support and cooperation and when the quality of learning was dependent in most cases on the local composition of teachers. However, the growing cooperation of scholars across institutions and countries, the increasing mobility of students, the frequent and rapid virtual communication and other factors related to new technology and internationalisation are likely to reduce the weight of the individual location for the quality of research and for the competences of the individual students. For example, we might phase out the term “centres of excellence” and substitute it by “networks of excellence”. It might become substantially less relevant than in the past to know from where the student graduated: rather, his or her “diploma supplement” will show what kind of knowledge, from what places, he or she has assembled.

#### SYSTEM STEERING AND INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT

Over the preceding two decades, we observed a substantial change in the steering and administration system of higher education in Europe: departing from a model of strong state supervision of the policies and the administrative processes along a strong academic self-regulation towards the managerial university characterised by

- reduced procedural controls by government, often combined with increased strategic steering by government,
- increased resource allocation powers within higher education institutions,
- increased managerial powers (i.e. growing power of the executives within higher education institutions),
- a growth of the number of professionals in higher education combined with a reduction of the role of the academic profession, and
- a growing role of mechanisms of evaluation, reporting, etc.

Innovation of steering and management is, beside internationalisation in higher education, one of two major themes of higher education reforms since the 1980s that is characterised by “high expectations” on the part of the advocates of those reforms. We also note that the majority of higher education researchers addressing these themes are also quite enthusiastic as far as the potential results of these reforms are concerned. Concurrently, we note an increasing combination of researchers’ and actors’ roles: we note higher education researchers concurrently active as consultants, institutional researchers, administrators involved in research part-time, consultants producing analyses similar in outlook to academic papers, etc. This mix and overlap between research and practice turn out to be creative in many respects (cf. Teichler 2000), but obviously, a danger is inherent: most analyses emerging are so strongly shaped by the high expectations that they are somewhat blind to the possible “mixed performance” which tends to show up in the implementation process of reforms. The same was true for major higher education reforms in the 1970s. Initially, analyses by those advocating the reforms and sympathising with them dominated. A few aggressive counterattacks followed, before analyses were undertaken which could show the “high expectations” and “mixed performance” *sine ira et studio* (see Cerych & Sabatier 1986).

Higher education researchers who note that analyses on certain areas of higher education tend to be overwhelmed by the prevailing values of a certain *zeitgeist* can contribute to solid research by formulating critical counter-hypothesis to the “high expectations” prevailing, for example on hidden and disguised rationales for reforms, possibly wrong underlying assumptions on the causes of existing problems and the possible impacts of reform measures, barriers of implementation, unintended effects, etc. (cf. the critical accounts of popular notions by Kogan et al. 2002; Birnbaum 2000; Amaral & Magalhaes 2001). They should examine the actual situation on the basis of a conceptual framework based on competing hypotheses of the virtues and problems of reform agendas.

In recent years, most of the public debates, as well as most research, have focussed on the implementation of these mechanisms and the way they are handled by the new managerial class as well as on the changing role of government. This prime emphasis on the actual operation of new steering and management settings, valuable as it might be to understand the logic of the new system, can be characterised as *a l’art pour l’art* view on the operations of governance and management, because it focuses on operations in these domains without scrutiny regarding the effects beyond the administrative domain. Surprisingly little attention is paid to other issues, e.g the implications of these changes for other actors, notably the

scholars who might consider themselves downgraded to “assembly line workers” of the higher education system, and the actual impact of the changed steering and management system on the core functions of higher education.

Substantial higher education reform efforts around 1970 were less successful than hoped for because of naive views regarding the implementation of the processes and uncritical reform approaches which merely looked at the strengths, but not at the possible weaknesses, of the reform concepts. Three decades later, we can ask ourselves whether the new wave of major reform approaches have to be handled in similar naive fashion or whether reforms might be more successful because of wiser anticipation of the problems of implementation and the mixed impact of the reforms.

Information already available now indicates that the following problems of the managerial reforms are likely to be paid more attention in the future and, therefore, might be priority areas of research in this domain:

- Is the increase of costs incurred by the “managerial university” a worthwhile investment, a vicious circle, or a move towards “lean management”?
- To what extent do we observe growing resistance, circumvention and deviancy on the part of the academic profession as reaction to the reduction of their role and the downgrading of their professional autonomy, and what does this imply for the core functions of higher education?
- What kind of power structure is likely to emerge in the “post-managerial” or “post-entrepreneurial” higher education system?
- What kind of realignments of the evaluation systems take place in the process of expansion of these activities with consequences of over-complexity, inconsistency and heavy workload implied? Do we observe a maturation of the evaluation culture, a routinisation, an increasing or decreasing impact on decision-making?
- Is there a loss of creativity of academics as a consequence of pressures for visible efficiency, relevance, i.e. a loss of innovation inherent in pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, a reduction of long-term and high-risk research approaches, etc.?
- Do we observe a growing interest in deliberate dis-information on the part of all administrative actors in order to raise the institutional position in a competitive environment and thus contribute to a loss of validity, transparency and quality of information?

## INTERNATIONALISATION

Internationalisation became a key issue in debates on higher education in most European countries during the 1990s (cf. Scott 1998; Teichler 1999; van der Wende 2001), and it is likely to remain high on the agenda in the near future. Various terms tend to be employed, often without any clear concept of their meanings and activities addressed in mind. If these terms are meant to address different realities:

- internationalisation often is viewed as a growth of border-crossing activities while national systems persist, at least to a certain extent; thereby, internationalisation is often referred to when issues of cooperation and physical mobility, knowledge transfer as well as international education are addressed;
- globalisation tends to assume that the borders as such get blurred or even disappear in the process of increasing international activities; the term is often associated to market-steering, trans-national education and commercial knowledge transfer; and
- Europeanisation is the regional version of either internationalisation or globalisation; it is frequently addressed when reference is made to cooperation and mobility, but beyond that to integration, convergence of contexts, structures and substances as well as to segmentation between regions of the world.

Moreover, the terms “internationalisation” and “globalisation” of higher education are not only employed with respect to border-crossing activities. Increasingly, reform efforts and actual changes with regard to most key elements of higher education systems; for example the structures of study programmes and the strategic profiles of higher education institutions, are explained as consequences of internationalisation and globalisation. Various essays presented in the book “Higher Education in a Globalising World” (Enders & Fulton 2002) are vivid examples of interpretations that currently globalisation – similar to the trend towards a “knowledge society” – is one of the “mega-trends” crucial for the development of higher education.

Research on internationalisation and globalisation, similar to research on system steering and institutional management, belongs to those areas of higher research which are strongly shaped by the values of the researchers involved. Simultaneously, we note many links and overlaps between researchers and practitioners in that field, and most research is commissioned by agencies promoting the increasing internationalisation of higher education.

Again, these links turn out both to be creative and to reinforce a broad range of literature characterised by simple adaptation to the values of the actors. Research can be future-conscious if it raises the critical questions as counter-hypotheses to the assumptions of the actors. This would help to develop a conceptual framework suitable to test the assumptions of the actors, and thus possibly formulate alternative assumptions that are more likely to be raised by the public in the future, when the currently favourable mood for internationalisation of higher education will have faded away.

First, research should examine the educational benefits of internationalisation: Under what conditions do which activities serve most strongly the widely claimed educational benefits of internationalisation of higher education, e.g. rapid knowledge transfer, increasing international competencies, quality improvement of reflective thinking, growing international understanding or even improvement of career prospects in general?

Second, creative research designs are needed to examine how internationalisation and globalisation affect the extent of homogeneity or diversity of higher education within countries and across countries. For example, does the growing international interaction inevitably increase pressures for structural convergence among national higher education systems, as the Bologna declaration seems to suggest?

Third, it is a fascinating theme for higher education research to examine what kind of forces emerge in the process of internationalisation of higher education to measure and what kinds of measurements are established. Does the emergence of a world-wide higher education system create a need to measure minutely quality levels of individual scholars, departments and higher education institutions? Or does it call for classes such as the widely used Carnegie classification of US higher education institutions? Does it encourage networks between departments and institutions mutually trusting each other without further clarification why the rest should be viewed with mistrust? Does it encourage the establishment of “thumb-rule” measures of equivalence, such as programme and degree levels, credits, etc. without any genuine measure of quality? The trend towards increased measurement (of quality, efficiency etc.) in higher education is not confined to issues related to the internationalisation of higher education. Governments, higher education institutions and other agencies tend to increase activities of data collection, for example in order to produce “performance indicators”, and of evaluation. The more the actors or their supervisors measure themselves the phenomena and the impact of certain policy measures, the more higher education research is forced to define its specific role of measuring. Does research only fill the gaps? Does it

measure phenomena that the self-measuring activities in the system tend to overlook? Does it measure more systematically? Does higher education research become a meta-measuring social actor?

Fourth, it is interesting to note how the forces of supervision and control of higher education change in the process of “de-nationalisation” of higher education. Do national governments continue to keep control of crucial measures of shaping higher education? Do national actors use the weakening national control for increasing imperialistic control of higher education in other countries? Is there visible demand for the emergence or strengthening of international supervisory actors? Will the “invisible hand” of a world-wide higher education market be the major force in determining the character of research, teaching and learning in higher education? Who will guarantee that the balance between freedom of pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and some moderate pressures for social relevance will persist which is generally believed to have been the creative magic of the European-style university at least over the last two centuries? Or what will happen if globalisation creates pressures to terminate this traditional balance?

Fifth, globalisation as well as other factors lead to a growing need to compare elements of the world-wide higher education system, i.e. the character and the profile of institutions and programmes, the competences of students and graduates, etc. How does the world-wide higher education system change itself under expectations of “comparability” and “diversity”, and how do the systems of measuring and assuring equivalences change? Sixth, it will be interesting to note how the debate on “globalisation” will progress. While currently emphasis is placed on merely operational and managerial dimensions of “globalisation”, i.e. marketisation, growing competition, the view of the trend towards globalisation might become more complex in higher education, asking also about the development towards global understanding, global cohesion, global responsibilities for environment, etc.

#### PROFESSIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education research activities addressing possible futures related to higher education expansion, diversification in higher education, changes in system steering and institutional management as well as internationalisation and globalisation of higher education – the thematic areas discussed above – have one element in common. They address thematic areas that are already viewed as very important today and they are assumed to remain a focus of concern, debate and search for improvement in the future.

Future-conscious higher education research also could put an emphasis on thematic areas that are currently not in the limelight of public attention, but are likely to be in the near future. Therefore, higher education could try to identify phenomena already visible that have in common obvious potential of becoming sufficiently relevant and problematic of becoming a major target of reform efforts.

Certainly, there are higher risks involved in predicting future key issues of debate and reform efforts when major debates have not yet started. Yet, changes might already been underway which are more or less bound to be the focus of attention in the future. One example should be presented as the final one.

During the 1990s, it became a conventional wisdom in higher education debates in Europe that higher education has to professionalise. Attention was paid during that period to the move from the short-term assignments of a rector and dean who served, as *primus inter pares*, a moderating function, to long-term assignment and executive powers of the new managerial class in higher education, i.e. rectors, deans and possibly their deputies. Parallel to this professionalisation of managerial leaders, institutions of higher education in Europe experience a substantial growth of higher education professionals, i.e. highly qualified persons in universities who are neither top managers nor in charge of the academic functions of teaching, research, etc. These professionals are active in areas of (mostly internal) services or the assistance for the management processes. In some countries, the number of university-educated professional staff of that kind was smaller than a tenth of the number of academics, but rapidly increased in recent years up to possibly one third or even half of the number of academics (cf. Gornitza et al. 1998).

We can imagine that this “silent revolution” of the workplace university will not continue to progress in silence. Analyses will be needed and decisions will have to be made regarding the functions, the careers and the training of these persons as well as the interrelationships between these professionals and the managers on the one hand and the academics on the other. The rise of the professionals might have a quite more salient impact on knowledge of the higher education system, deliberation and decision-making than most actors tend to believe today. Therefore, this component of professionalisation in higher education is likely to turn out as a good example of how future-conscious higher education research can identify a major issue of future debate and can provide information and interpretation in time to serve a major debate in terms of when it actually will occur.

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