

Keyword: International Research on Higher Education. Scholarship Between Policy and Science

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Abstract: Together with overall research on higher education, comparative and international studies of higher education have expanded considerably over the past decade in different parts of the world. While truly comparative research is still rather rare, it is beginning to yield important theoretical insights into such issues as the institutionalization of higher education, governance, access, curricula, and quality assessment. In addition, a growing body of more descriptive work on higher education, together with new and expanding data sources, provides an increasingly rich basis for further comparative work along different methodological lines. The gap between theoretically inspired and policy-triggered research on higher education is still considerable, but some initial bridges are being built.

Keywords: Comparative Studies · Higher Education · Higher Education Research · International Research · Overview · State of the Art · Universities

Stichwort: Internationale Hochschulforschung. Forschung zwischen Politik und Wissenschaft

Zusammenfassung: Die Hochschulforschung insgesamt – und damit auch die vergleichende und internationale Untersuchung von Hochschulen – hat im vergangenen Jahrzehnt in vielen Teilen der Welt erhebliche Fortschritte gemacht. Obwohl vergleichende Forschung im engeren Sinne nach wie vor selten ist, trägt sie zunehmend zur Gewinnung wichtiger theoretischer Einsichten in die Institutionalisierung von Hochschulen, in Strukturen und Steuerung, in den Zugang zur Hochschulbildung, in universitäre Lehrpläne und die Messung von Qualität bei. Darüber hinaus schaffen eine ständig zunehmende deskriptive Literatur sowie neue und expandierende Datensätze eine immer reichhaltigere Basis für weitere vergleichende Arbeiten nach unterschiedlichen methodologischen Ansätzen. Die Kluft zwischen theoretisch begründeter und von hochschulpolitischen Erwägungen gesteuerter Forschung ist nach wie vor beträchtlich, doch lässt sich der Beginn eines Brückenbaus feststellen.

Schlüsselwörter: Hochschulen · Hochschulforschung · Universitäten · Vergleichende Untersuchungen · Internationale Forschung · Überblick · Bestandsaufnahme

1. International research on higher education: Of scope, focus, and boundaries

To deal with “international research on higher education” in a professional journal published in Germany poses some non-trivial problems of delimitation. What do we mean by “international” when talking about research on higher education? Conceivably, we could define international research as research by “internationals”, i. e., non-Germans, or perhaps even limit our scope to studies of German higher education by non-German scholars? Or perhaps as research on “international” phenomena in higher education, i. e., issues that transcend national boundaries such as the international migration of academic talent or the increasingly salient effects of globalization on higher education? Or alternatively as research that is organized on an international level, i. e., by international organizations or by institutions and groups of researchers that come from different countries? Or possibly even limit our task to research on the international properties of systems of higher education (sometimes called “internationalization”), such as their international exchange arrangements, their international curricula, or their “offshore” activities? All of these are perfectly legitimate areas of scholarly inquiry, and each has its own distinct research strategy, its own theoretical and methodological orientations, and its own rather unique literature. In the interest of providing a reasonable degree of depth, however, this review will have to resist the temptation of adopting an unduly broad and overly inclusive purview and to choose a more limited and focused perspective. Our choice of a particular perspective for the purpose of this review acknowledges the fact that, in the final analysis, research that transcends the boundaries of a single national system of higher education yields the most significant scholarly insights and theoretical understanding only if it utilizes the explanatory, or at least the heuristic, utility of cross-system comparisons.

Based on that premise, this review of international research on higher education will focus on (if not limit itself entirely to) studies that are

- empirical in nature,
- internationally or cross-nationally comparative in design, and
- explicitly informed by theory.

For the most part, this article will adhere to this narrower definition, and thus exclude a significant body of work that deals, in a variety of more or less useful ways, with higher education, but is essentially limited to descriptions of the structural, legal, psychological or economic conditions of a given national system of higher education or the populations of students, teachers and staff inhabiting it. Quite a few exceptions will be made, however, where one or even more of the three conditions mentioned above are not fully met, but where studies have important other characteristics that make them interesting stepping stones toward, or useful heuristic instances for, the further advancement of international research on higher education as defined more strictly. Moreover, a separate section (2) of this review will deal with various kinds of professional literature that, while not strictly conforming to the criteria specified above, serve as important and often indispensable background for international research in higher education in its stricter sense.

Clearly, not all studies dealing with more than one country are comparative in design and explanatory strategy; quite a few studies consist essentially, and sometimes even

usefully, of the juxtaposition of descriptive accounts of different systems of higher education. This is true of a number of handbooks as well as of material put out on a more or less regular basis by international organizations such as UNESCO, the OECD or the International Association of Universities.

Similarly, not all studies that are based on observations within one national system of higher education are necessarily irrelevant from a comparative point of view. As, for example, Leyser and Romi (2008) have shown in a study of teacher trainees from different national/religious groups within the Israeli system of higher education, there is substantial within-system variation on a wide range of institutional and/or cultural characteristics that can yield important comparative insights. A particular effort will be made to identify research that, while conducted in one national setting, is theoretically developed and configured in such a way as to lend itself well to further and internationally comparative studies.

This review will cast its net widely and will draw on research originating in different parts of the world. The degree to which this effort is successful, however, is limited by a number of factors (which in themselves are somewhat indicative of the nature of the field). One limitation clearly is the uneven access of researchers around the world to the world of higher education research and its means of dissemination; even though initiatives such as the nascent UNESCO Forum on Higher Education, Research and Knowledge (Neave 2006; Vessuri/Teichler 2008) and the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI 2008) have begun to open up international channels of communication for higher education researchers from different parts of the world, research originating in Europe, Australia, and North America still enjoys, for a variety of well-known reasons, much greater visibility than work coming out of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Together with the prevalence of the English language as a means of scholarly communication in this as well as other fields, this uneven pattern of access creates considerable distortion in the perception of research done outside the “center” of the international knowledge system and in languages other than English. Serious efforts to overcome these biases notwithstanding, this review is by no means free of such distortion.

This situation is, however, in the process of changing. In recent years a number of professional journals have emerged in other parts of the world and are becoming increasingly important venues for the communication and dissemination of research in higher education. The *Journal of Higher Education in Africa* (JHEA), published under the auspices of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA); the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (SAJHE), published under the auspices of the South African Association for Research and Development in Higher Education; the *ICFAI Journal of Higher Education* (IJHE) from India, now in its third year; the *Chinese-language Comparative Education Review* (CCER); and the *Asia Pacific Journal of Education* (APJE), published on behalf of the Centre for Research in Pedagogy and Practice at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, and devoting a fair portion of its space to higher education, are cases in point and reflect, at varying levels of quality and sophistication, a growing volume and intensity of national and international research on higher education outside of Europe and North America.

In addition, the journals of a number of international organizations have become important media for the publication and dissemination of higher education research in

non-Western parts of the world; among the more important ones are Higher Education Policy (HEP), published under the auspices of the International Association of Universities (IAU) and Prospects, published by UNESCO's International Bureau of Education (IBE) in Geneva.

This review will, to be sure selectively, reach into this body of work as well as into the substantial volume of higher education research originating in Europe and North America and finding its venue of publication in such journals as *Higher Education*, *Higher Education Quarterly*, the *Journal of Higher Education*, *Studies in Higher Education*, *Tertiary Education and Management*, and *Higher Education in Europe* or in periodicals devoted to the comparative study of education (*Comparative Education Review*, *Compare*, *Comparative Education*, *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *Journal of Studies in International Education* and the *European Journal of Education*) as well as occasionally in disciplinary journals such as the *American Sociological Review*, or hybrids like *Sociology of Education* and *International Studies in Sociology of Education*. In selecting from what, my earlier delimitations notwithstanding, is still a massive amount of literature, I have leaned heavily towards more recent publications so as to capture the "cutting edge" of the field as much as possible.

A word needs to be said about how this review deals with the vast amount of research dealing exclusively with higher education in the United States of America (US). By all accounts, and even though quality is highly varied, this represents the bulk of all higher education research produced in the world – a phenomenon that is in itself worthy of further investigation (see, *inter alia*, Tight 2003, 2007). Strictly speaking, research on the higher education system of the US or on individual American institutions does not fall within the purview of international research on higher education as defined for purposes of this review. Quite a number of exceptions are being made in this review, however, especially where a particular study provides an interesting contrast or referent for research done at the international and comparative level; research on university admissions (see below, part 4.1.1) is a case in point, as is a special issue of *The Journal of College and University Law* (2004) on the effects of the "war on terrorism" on American higher education and research.

The task of this review is facilitated by the results of a project centred primarily on European higher education research and sponsored by the European Science Foundation since the fall of 2006 (European Science Foundation 2007, 2008). The project has conducted its review of higher education research in five "clusters":

- higher education and the needs of the knowledge society,
- higher education and the achievement (or prevention) of equity and social justice,
- higher education and its communities: interconnections and interdependencies,
- steering and governance in higher education, and
- differentiation and diversity of institutional forms.

While this project's extensive review of the research literature (including a good deal of literature from outside of Europe) is very useful throughout, the intellectual contribution of the work on governance in higher education (Ferlie, Musselin, and Andresani 2007) is particularly penetrating and seminal. The future directions of research on higher educa-

tion that have emerged from this project are now available in a separate report (European Science Foundation 2008).

2. International research on higher education: Background, data sets, and synopses

There are three kinds of literature that, while not strictly speaking dealing with research, are both fairly voluminous and, at least in part, quite useful to the field of higher education research in an indirect way and therefore deserving at least to be mentioned in a review of this kind.

2.1 Policies and goals

The first of these is the constantly growing volume of policy-oriented, largely prescriptive literature on what higher education in a given setting ought or ought not to be like. Some, though by no means all, of this literature has an important place in the discourse on higher education policy and often provides capable interpretations of existing research as well as interesting stimuli for further systematic research; a good example is the critical assessment of American higher education provided by Hersh and Merrow first in their book (2005), then in a widely noted documentary on US public television, its characterization as “A Whining View of Higher Education” by Robert Zemsky (2005a) notwithstanding. Similarly penetrating, although representing a different perspective, is Zemsky’s own contribution to this debate (2005b).

As is often the case, analysis and prescription are close cousins; higher education is no exception. A prominent case in point is Burton Clark’s influential book on “entrepreneurial universities” (1998) which is both a careful comparative analysis of the transformation of several European universities and an eloquent piece of advocacy for the advantages of a more entrepreneurial incarnation of higher education institutions. A less well-known but instructive example is the recent two-volume treatment of “African Universities in the Twenty-First Century”, published under the auspices of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and providing a mostly research-based discussion of most of the key issues facing higher education in Africa, from the impact of globalization to the development of private universities and from the utilization of educational technology to the role of gender (Zeze/Olukoshi 2008). Other recent examples include Newfield (2008) and Ordorika (2004); Teichler contributes to this genre of both research- and policy-based analysis a particularly penetrating volume on the internationalization of universities (2007).

Over the past twenty years or so a very significant critical literature has emerged around the issue of the international dominance of particular, notably “Western” models of higher education, claiming that the knowledge base of these models poorly fits the cultural traditions and identities of non-Western societies, unduly constrains the international discourse on higher education and knowledge creation, and underestimates the significance of non-Western contributions to the worldwide discourse on knowledge. Some of the leading voices in this debate are Ashis Nandy from India (2000), Susantha

Goonatilake from Sri Lanka (1998), Paulin Hountondji from Benin (1997, 2002), Vinay Lal from India (2002), and Pablo Gonzalez Casanova from Mexico (1981); for overviews of the debate, see Inayatullah/Gidley 2000, Hayhoe/Pan 2001, and Weiler 2006; for contributions to this debate by Western scholars, see, inter alia, Harding 1998, Fuller 2000, and Nowotny/Scott/Gibbons 2001.

2.2 Overviews, synopses, and compendia

A second type of literature, typically in the form of edited volumes, is devoted to relatively broad overviews of higher education in a given country, region or, indeed, the world at large. For the most part, contributions to these volumes often make for interesting and stimulating reading, even where they do not qualify as systematic research; in many cases, they serve a very useful function in providing synopses and critiques of the existing research literature. One of the most recent and most encompassing of these is the “International Handbook of Higher Education” by Forest and Altbach (2006). Other cases in point are Enders/Fulton (2002), Garcia Guadilla (2002), Altbach/Umakoshi (2004), Altbach/Berdahl/Gumport (2005), Iacobucci/Tuohy (2005), Meek/Suwanwela (2006), Altbach/Peterson (2007), Kogan/Teichler (2007), or Kehm (2007), as well as the recent state of the art volume by Gumport on the sociology of higher education (2007) and the remarkably rich *Festschriften* in honor of two distinguished higher education scholars, Maurice Kogan and Ulrich Teichler (Bleiklie/Henkel 2005; Enders/Fulton 2002). Into a related, but also very pertinent mode fall some of the more thoughtful reflections of distinguished former university leaders (good examples from the world of American and British higher education are Bok 2003, Vest 2007, and Shattock 2003). A special place in the field is held by the annual “Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research” which, since 1985, compiles major research studies on higher education each year, though overwhelmingly on US higher education, and has recently brought out its 22nd volume (Smart 2007).

2.3 Data

A third body of work is of more direct relevance especially to international and comparative higher education research in that it provides valuable source material and baseline data for scholarly and comparative analysis. There is again considerable variation in quality, validity, and reliability of many of these data, but the general tendency is in the direction of ever better, more reliable and more complete data. Notable in this context are, especially for the industrialized countries, the databases, statistics and reports of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), specifically its Online Education Database and the annual publication *Education at a Glance*¹ the analyses of higher education undertaken by the World Bank especially in developing countries (World Bank 2000, 2005), and assorted compendia published for the field of higher education by UNESCO on a worldwide or regional basis², especially through the handbooks and data bases of the International Association of Universities (IAU)³. Very useful data, in addition to a wide range of case and regional analyses, can also be found in the documentation published by GUNI (2008).

In this category also belongs a relatively new type of higher education databases that comprise, on the one hand, a growing body of data on scholarly productivity and impact such as the ISI Essential Science Indicators⁴ and, on the other hand, the growing number and scope of rankings of higher education institutions on both a national (e. g., those of the Centre for Higher Education Development [CHE] in Germany⁵) and international level (such as the Shanghai ranking⁶ or the rankings of the Times Higher Education Supplement⁷). Most of these efforts are now coordinated by the International Ranking Expert Group (IREG) and its International Observatory on Academic Ranking and Excellence⁸; they offer a constantly growing body of data that is as yet being used to only a limited degree for purposes of international and comparative research in higher education, but will undoubtedly become a more important source as these data on higher education quality will be systematically related to structural and policy characteristics of different countries. It will be interesting to see whether OECD's new initiative, currently at the stage of a feasibility study, for an "international assessment of higher education learning outcomes" (AHELO) will develop into another useful source of data for comparative research in higher education⁹.

3. International research on higher education: The state of the field

Thus far I have considered a number of cognate literatures that, while not representing international research on higher education in a stricter sense, are nonetheless of considerable importance in stimulating, assisting, and summarizing various kinds of higher education research at an international level. Turning now to what, in my initial boundary discussions, I have identified as the core of international research on higher education, I will first provide an overview of the state of that field of research before moving on to drawing a "topical map" to indicate some of the centres of gravity of current research.

A general assessment of the state of international research on higher education and its recent trajectory would seem to reveal the following broad characteristics:

- 1) The sheer volume of research that is either international (in any sense of the term) or more strictly comparative has tremendously increased over the past ten years, clearly reflecting both an overall increase in the interest in higher education and a significant degree of internationalization of that interest.
- 2) As part of this process, both the absolute number of studies and the number of countries where research on higher education has been conducted have increased dramatically. Where, ten or fifteen years ago, most serious research on higher education was limited to the major Western European countries, Australia, and North America (Canada and the US), there is now a growing body of inquiry into the higher education systems of Central and Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa. Just looking, for example, at the first six issues in 2008 of one of the leading journals in the field, *Higher Education*, the total of 43 articles represents studies in 20 different countries from all continents, led by Europe (17 articles), Australia (8), and the US (7), but with studies from Chile, Malawi, Taiwan and Kenya as well. This journal clearly makes a special effort to reach out to research and researchers from a wider range of

settings, as do journals like the *Comparative Education Review* or *Higher Education Policy* that have a specific mandate for international and comparative work; most other journals in the field provide a notable, but more modest range of country experiences in reporting on higher education research. An outlier towards the other end of the distribution is *The Journal of Higher Education* which, over a span of almost three years, has published at most one or two articles that do *not* deal with higher education in the US (including, however, an excellent comparative analysis of job satisfaction among European college graduates – see Vila/García-Aracil/Mora 2007).

- 3) At the same time, there continues to be – notable exceptions notwithstanding – a remarkable dearth of studies in higher education that are, even in a relatively loose sense, comparative in nature and design. The same six issues of *Higher Education* that were used to demonstrate geographical breadth contain no more than three (out of 43) articles that could be considered comparative in any way. A similar pattern prevails even in journals that carry “comparative” in their title. Even though this relatively low percentage of comparative studies is remarkable, the sheer expansion of the overall body of higher education research means that there has still been a significant overall increase in comparative studies of higher education; these are often limited to as little as two or three countries – often comparing a given country with the United States; for some particularly interesting examples, see Lenhardt’s recent book on higher education in Germany and the US (2005), the study by McManus on self-employment mobility in the US and Germany (2004) or the studies by Sporn on structural adaptation in Europe and the US (1999) and by Reisz and Stock (2007) on long-term changes in participation rates in higher education.

Especially for Europe there is a growing number of studies comparing various aspects of higher education across a sizeable number of European countries, an early and influential pilot being Burton Clark’s work on entrepreneurial universities in Europe (1998), and one of the latest being the volume edited by Maassen and Olsen (2007) on the institutional dynamics of the European university. I will deal with this body of work and its substantive centres of gravity in a further section of this article; at that point, I will also have to assess the argument that comparisons of smaller numbers of cases, while possibly losing some of the statistical and inferential leverage of studies with larger *N*s, can and do in their better examples mobilize the advantage of context-rich explanations that tends to get lost over a large number of national settings.

- 4) To the extent that it is true, however, that large-scale comparisons are, in higher education as elsewhere, the true measure of analytical and explanatory strength, the field of higher education appears remarkably impoverished – again a few notable exceptions notwithstanding. This becomes strikingly obvious if one looks, for the sake of calibration, at a discipline like political science which, going back to classics like “*The Civic Culture*” in the early 1960s (Almond/Verba 1963), has over the decades generated an extraordinarily rich body of more and more tightly designed comparative analyses which have yielded, as good comparative work should, remarkable theoretical returns. Even though it is somewhat unfair to hold a relatively fledgling field like higher education research to the standards set by as well-endowed a discipline as political science, it remains noteworthy that, with very few exceptions, this patently useful research strategy has not yet firmly established itself for the field of higher

education. In my further discussion, I will – not altogether uncritically – deal in more detail with the exceptions to this observation (notably the work initiated and inspired by John Meyer and his colleagues: *inter alia*, Meyer 1977; Meyer/Ramirez 2000; Schofer/Meyer 2005; Frank/Gabler 2006) and show the remarkable impact they can and do have, but it remains part of an overall assessment of the field to note that, in a rapidly growing literature on international research in higher education, these are still the exceptions.

- 5) As one reviews a fairly substantial body of literature, one also becomes aware of a remarkable segmentation of the field into what Tight (2008, see below) would call “tribes and communities” in international higher education research that hardly take cognizance of one another. The most important of these cleavages seem to appear between research originating in the US, notably the work in the tradition of John Meyer’s school of “institutional theory”, and work coming out of European centers of higher education research, notably in the UK, the Netherlands, and Germany. This is not the place to do a detailed citation (or non-citation) analysis, but it is striking to see an almost perfect degree of mutual exclusion between the bibliographies of, say, Schofer/Meyer 2005, Ramirez 2006, and Baker/Lenhardt 2008, on the one hand, and Witte 2006, Huisman/Meek/Wood 2007, and Ferlie/Musselin/Andresani 2007, on the other. Even Stichweh, whose work is by theoretical orientation an interesting variant on Meyer’s perspectives, manages to complete one of his most recent pieces (2006) without a single reference to the research literature that Meyer has inspired. Without pursuing the matter here, the nature and the genesis of these cleavages would seem to beg for a good deal of further inquiry.
- 6) Lastly, any field of scholarly research needs to pass the test of how far it has come in making itself the subject of systematic and critical inquiry; in the long run, research is only as good as the depth of critical reflection on its own epistemological and methodological premises. Measured by this standard, the field of higher education research does not score highly; indeed, one of the pioneers of this kind of inquiry concludes that “higher education research remains a field of study in need of significant further development everywhere” (Tight 2007, p. 252; see also Tight 2003 and, for Europe, Maassen and Olsen 2007, p. xi). Few and far between are the instances in the literature where this kind of reflection is made explicit. Two examples will serve both to show that there are exceptions and to demonstrate the nature of what is being postulated. One is, clearly with a purview that goes beyond higher education research, a special issue of the journal *Comparative Education* (2006) on “comparative methodologies in the social sciences”, in which Ramirez has taken it upon himself to discuss the special challenges of “revitalizing a comparative sociology of education” (Ramirez 2006; see also Schofer/McEneaney 2003; Hutchinson/Lovell 2004). Regarding the more specific methodological challenges of cross-country comparisons of educational accomplishments in a context of varying national metrics, Banschbach (2007) provides a useful analysis that refutes the claim, often made by less successful countries like Germany, of non-comparability.

In a different vein that is both comparative and empirical, Tight has undertaken to identify, in a massive co-citation analysis, “the tribes and communities of practice that occupy

the territory of higher education research”, particularly in the English-language literature outside of North America (2008). The clusters which emerge from his analysis do indeed confirm both the existence of identifiable “tribes” in higher education research and the gravitational pull of some contributors to this body of research, most notably Burton Clark (e. g., 1995, 1998). Another interesting part of Tight’s work compares published research on higher education inside and outside North America. Confirming in a slightly different way the kinds of observations that this review has already made (see above, item 5), he shows how different national or regional research cultures can be, concluding that North American research in higher education reveals more interest in institutional and national level studies, much more use of multivariate analysis, and tends to be theoretically and methodologically more explicit than work published elsewhere (Tight 2007).

4. International research on higher education: Centers of gravity

Against the background of these overviews, this section will seek to identify some of the more important centers of gravity in contemporary international research in higher education, and provide for each of them some particularly instructive instances of research. Neither the issues identified as centers of gravity nor the studies selected to illustrate current research on these issues are in any way complete or even fully representative, but they should provide an indication of both the range of issues currently being studied and of the variety of approaches used in studying them. These issues fall roughly into three broad categories or clusters:

- Issues of equity and mobility
- Issues of institutionalization and governance
- Issues of content and quality

There is obviously something artificial about a grid of this kind in a setting where there are many interconnections between the different elements; clearly, for example, equity in access has a great deal to do with the emergence of privatization and marketization in higher education, and it is ultimately impossible to deal with quality control in higher education without looking very closely at governance. While most current research still organizes itself into these categories, it is important to keep these patterns of interaction in mind.

4.1 Equity and mobility

Within this cluster of research, the principal areas of research concentration deal with entry and exit, i. e., with access to higher education and with the patterns of mobility that result upon the completion of higher education programs. Cutting across both of these areas, but singled out here because of the recent surge in scholarly work in this field, is the question of how gender relates to both access and mobility.

4.1.1 Access

Probably the most significant research contribution to the issue of stratification in higher education is the recently published volume by Shavit et al. (2007) which is based on a tightly organized set of 15 country studies in Europe, Asia, North America, and Australia and seems to substantiate that the combination of expansion and differentiation has led to “more inclusion than diversion” (2007, Chapter 1; see also Reisz/Stock 2007), even though there is a great deal of variation around this overall tendency. While not presenting original research, Brennan and Naidoo have conducted a fairly encompassing review of the literature on “higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice” (2007); for two other useful overviews, see Clancy et al. (2007) and Deil-Amen/López Turley (2007).

On a less ambitious scale, a number of recent studies have shed further light on the correlates and determinants of access to institutions of higher education in different settings. Iannelli (2007) provides a comparison over time between Scotland, England, and Wales, showing that the expansion of higher education has reduced social inequalities in access, but that social class differences persist at the degree level and in the choice of subjects studied, and that cross-regional differences in access for working class students remain, possibly as a result of the availability of vocational routes in some regions and not in others. Against the background of a thorough discussion of the theoretical discourse on elite recruitment, Unterweger-Treven (2006) provides a comparison of the selection mechanisms and processes in the United Kingdom and in France; for the case of France, the work of Euriat and Thélot (1995), reviewing the development of inequalities over the period 1950 to 1990, documents this particularly intricate case of elite recruitment.

In an article that provides interesting comparisons among all OECD countries on the different enrolment ratios of new university students, Banschbach contributes a helpful clarification on some of the statistical and categorical problems of comparisons of this kind, which have become increasingly salient for policy discussions on different national efforts in higher education (2007). Similarly useful for comparative work is the “Higher Education Participation Index” that Clancy and Goastellec have developed to facilitate cross-country comparisons on the degree of social diversity in entering student populations (2007), while Otero and Whitworth, taking a different empirical approach, analyze rhetoric and policy on equality in higher education in Spain and the UK (2006). Systematic studies of access to higher education outside of Europe and the US are as yet rather rare; two rather instructive examples deal with Makerere University in Uganda (Kwesiga/Ahikire 2006) and Chile (Torche 2005).

It is not surprising that higher education in the US, with its high degree of selectivity and differentiation, has become the target of a particularly rich research effort on equality of access. A very influential study on the issue of race in college admissions has been that of Bowen and Bok (1998); more recently, a whole series of books (Schmidt 2007; Douglass 2007; Soares 2007; Sacks 2007) have addressed what, in his essay critically reviewing these books, Lavergne (2007) calls “college admissions as conspiracy theory”. Two studies representative of the vast research literature on college admissions in the US and of the complexity of research design in connecting educational success and admissions under conditions of selectivity are Alon/Tienda 2005 and Espenshade/Hale/Chung 2005.

4.1.2 Mobility

At the point of exit from higher education, research has focused primarily on the transition to the labor market, and on the effects that higher education has on the nature of that transition and on graduates' mobility more generally. In recent years Europe has been a particularly rich scene for research of this kind; representative examples of studies range from the actual process of moving from higher education to employment (Blitz 1999; Salas-Velasco 2007; Schomburg 2007) to studies of the match or mismatch between graduates' competencies and choice of subject, on the one hand, and their success in the job market in terms of both pay and job satisfaction, on the other hand (Mora/García-Aracil/Vila 2007; Vila/García-Aracil/Mora 2007; García-Aracil/Van der Velden 2008; for a pertinent companion study from the US, see Roksa 2005).

4.1.3 Gender

Some of the most interesting, and certainly the most rapidly expanding, work in the areas of access and mobility has had to do with gender, i. e., with both the pattern of women's access into higher education and their success, educational as well as occupational, once they have entered and left. Bradley and Ramirez have pioneered large-scale data analysis in this realm, documenting the development of women's share of higher education worldwide from 1965 to 1985 (1996); in a similar design, a later study has dealt with the global expansion of women's participation in studying science and engineering (Ramirez/Wotipka 2001). Bradley and Charles (2004) have traced both the growth in tertiary female enrolment and the persistent gender differentiation within systems of higher education worldwide, and identified both global pressures for expansion and more equal access and cultural factors related to particular socio-historical settings.

The "gender earnings gap" among European higher education graduates is the subject of an econometric analysis by García-Aracil (2007), who claims to show that much of the earnings advantage of female workers can be explained by job characteristics (see, for very different results in a US study, Bobbit-Zeher 2007). Pritchard's study of gender inequality in British and German universities (2007) focuses on the difference in the ratio of women faculty (considerably higher in Britain) and seeks possible reasons for the difference in legislation, social and epistemological differences and institutional cultures of promotion.

4.2 Institutionalization and governance

One of the more striking phenomena in higher education research at both national and international levels is the rapidly growing preoccupation with the institutional qualities and effects of higher education and, not unrelated to this, the arrangements for the governance of higher education institutions. The concern with the institutionalization of higher education is the *Leitmotiv* of much of the work that was spawned by John Meyer's interest in the institutionalization of education, in general, and higher education, in particular (Meyer 1977; Meyer/Ramirez 2000). The scholarly concern with questions of governance has to some extent been one of the outcomes of this research tradition, but has also recei-

ved a great deal of encouragement from the growing preoccupation in higher education policy with the reform of decision structures and steering arrangements in universities and with such issues as institutional autonomy, the role of the market, public vs. private responsibilities, financing arrangements, the management of teaching and research organizations, and the role of the professoriate (for a representative sample of this literature, see Sporn 1999; Marginson/Considine 2000; Arimoto 2002; Teichler 2005; Stock 2006; Maassen/Olsen 2007).

4.2.1 Institutionalization

One of the most recent in a long line of theoretically inspired and methodologically demanding comparative studies on the worldwide institutionalization of higher education is the article by Schofer and Meyer on the worldwide expansion of higher education enrollments in the twentieth century (2005). The authors' interest is in understanding the reasons behind both the acceleration rates and the differential patterns of expansion; to this end, they construct and identify the institutional processes of scientization, democratization and the spread of human rights, the rise of what they call "development planning", and the "structuration of the world polity". These processes have produced a construct of higher education that is cast in human capital terms and provides the energy for the unparalleled expansion of higher education in the modern world: "the expansion of higher education produces a world in which every society has a schooled population and institutions that function as a greatly expanded set of receptor sites collecting ideas and practices from world society" (2005, p. 917). While many of the explanations for this tremendous expansion are compelling, the companion argument about the all-encompassing "isomorphism" of higher education institutions around the world begs some differentiation in light of what we know about the cultural and institutional idiosyncrasies of higher education institutions. How useful the overall theoretical perspective can be in looking at higher education in a national context is well demonstrated by Baker and Lenhardt in their analysis of "the institutional crisis of the German research university" (2008) – part of an interesting collection of studies on "world-class universities" (Higher Education Policy 2008) – and by Krücken/Kosmützky/Torka (2007) in their collection of views of the university between global trends and national traditions.

In his very own way and deeply rooted in Niklas Luhmann's thought, Stichweh (2000, 2006) arrives at a kindred theoretical perspective on the relationship between "socially significant knowledge" and the ever more complex interaction between universities and their environment. This perspective at once complements and extends Meyer's discourse into an important historical dimension, especially for the tradition of European universities' relationship to their social order.

The recent book by Frank and Gabler (2006) on "Reconstructing the University: World-wide Shifts in Academia in the 20th century" is another major contribution to the research literature using institutional theory for the comparative analysis of higher education. These authors' focus, however, is on global shifts in the composition of the knowledge base of universities over the twentieth century, and their claim is that this knowledge base – discipline by discipline – gets legitimated within a global rather than a national context. An extraordinarily rich and competently mined data base adds a great deal of weight to

the book's argument; once again, however, the compelling sweep of large-scale comparisons may relegate a deeper comprehension of the rather tenacious identity of individual institutions further than is useful for a balanced understanding of the interaction between global and local forces.

Central to the research tradition of the kind of "institutional theory" just reviewed is the notion that systems of higher education around the world are on a converging course of ever greater similarity. That notion is being challenged by a thorough piece of research by Witte which looks at the response of four major European countries to the homogenizing mandate of the "Bologna Process" (2006). Theoretically, this study leans heavily on North's theory of institutional change (1990) and the "actor-centered institutionalism" developed by Mayntz and Scharpf (1995). Besides demonstrating the strength of in-depth analysis of individual countries within a comparative framework, the study also shows that the Bologna process has not yet engendered the kind of convergence among countries that theories of increasing worldwide isomorphism would predict.

One of the – for theoretical as well as policy reasons – increasingly important issues in the institutionalization of higher education is the issue of institutional diversity, i. e., the variety of institutional choices within a national system of higher education. In a study of ten European countries that is, among other things, quite remarkable for its lack of cognizance of the institutionalization literature just reviewed, Huisman, Meek and Wood (2007), describe different degrees and patterns of diversity, but do not get very far in explaining those differences. It seems that the bridge between theoretically inspired and policy-triggered comparative research on the institutionalization of higher education still needs to be built.

4.2.2 *Governance*

The same is probably true for the burgeoning field of professional concern with the governance of higher education institutions, i. e., with the institutional arrangements for making decisions, identifying and implementing institutional goals, allocating resources, and cooperating with other actors in the institution's environment. It is with regard to these concerns that Burton Clark's early book on "entrepreneurial universities" (1998) became so influential, arriving as it did in the midst of some rather significant reflections in many countries about better ways to govern institutions of higher education (for one of the many comparative follow-up studies, see Yokoyama 2006; for a rich reflection on the matter by one of the "subjects" of Clark's original study, see Shattock 2003).

The policy debate on governance in higher education is literally all over the map (see, for example, Trakman 2008; Comparative Education 2007; or Weiler 2005), but solid research, especially of a comparative nature, is as yet rather rare. Two recent volumes that bring together an array of studies on a variety of governance issues in higher education provide useful pilot work in this situation and testify to the tremendous degree of cross-national variation in governance arrangements (Amaral/Jones/Karseth 2002; Amaral/Meek/Larsen 2003), and one finds here and there interesting attempts at more in-depth comparative analyses of governance arrangements such as the one by Mazawi (2005) in the Arab states, or particularly revealing case studies such as Marginson/Considine (2000) on Australia or the one of UNAM in Mexico by Ordorika (2003).

One of the better inventories of such work as there is on governance in higher education is the paper on “the steering of higher education systems” for the European Science Foundation’s HELF project (Ferlie/Musselin/Andresani 2007). These authors perceive, quite correctly, major changes in the role of the state in serving the public and derive from them a new conception of the management of public institutions such as universities; their report not only usefully summarizes existing research, but also spells out a rather elaborate agenda for future research in the field of higher education governance (see also European Science Foundation 2008).

A number of specific governance issues have increasingly become the focus of international research. These include notably questions of higher education finance, where comparative analyses rely heavily on the international data provided by the OECD (for a recent example, see Institute for Higher Education Policy 2007), but where case studies of finance reform can be quite instructive as well, as the work of Tilak in India has shown (e. g., 1997). Other finance issues where cross-national comparisons have been employed include tuition fees (Jonbloed 2004) and student funding: Asian lessons in student loans have been analyzed by Ziderman 2004, while the use of student funding as a means of redress for earlier racial injustice is the subject of an interesting study in South Africa (Moja/Hayward 2005).

4.2.3 *Privatization and marketization*

Among some of the other issues in higher education governance – notably the role of the professoriate (see Altbach 2003; Welch 2005; Locke/Teichler 2007; and Stromquist et al. 2007) – one has become the subject of particularly extensive international debate: the privatization of higher education. Daniel Levy, in a very well documented “state of the art” piece, observes quite correctly: “The massive global growth of private sectors transforms higher education. It naturally sparks great interest and debate. But analysis lags far behind, as does cross-national documentation.” (2006a, p. 217). Most writings with an international perspective tend to be conceptual or normative (e. g., Mok 2002; Compare 2006), but there is a first crop of studies on European experiences (e. g., Fried/Glass/Baumgartl 2006), including Central and Eastern Europe, where the emergence of private institutions has been most rampant (Giesecke 2006), and on developments in North America under the influence of NAFTA (Barrow/Didou-Aupetit/Mallea 2003). Another country with a rapidly growing private sector in higher education is Chile, where Bernasconi (2006) looks at diversity in private higher education as a function of the involvement of external organizations.

A somewhat similar situation prevails where the analysis of the broader context of privatization, the “marketization” of higher education, is concerned. Here, however, a number of very knowledgeable books have appeared recently – largely, however, focused on the US situation. The most notable ones are Kirp 2003, Bok 2003, and Geiger 2004 – the last two, together with some others, the subject of an extensive review essay by Levy who concludes, perhaps a bit too charitably: “U.S. higher education could be considered a positive model for introducing a variety of market forms but not letting the market take unbridled control.” (Levy 2006b, p. 124). Rhoads and Torres may beg to disagree here and point to a number of studies on the Americas which they have brought together in a

volume (2005) that critically identifies the interactive forces of globalization, privatization, and marketization in higher education. Another international view is taken in a collection of case studies on market mechanisms in higher education in different countries edited by Teixeira et al. (2006).

4.3 Content and quality

The substance of what institutions of higher education are all about, i. e., the content of teaching and research programs, has not enjoyed much prominence in international research in the past. This is gradually changing, in part as a result of a growing policy preoccupation with questions of quality and competitiveness in higher education. There now is at least the beginning of serious comparative research on university curricula, on the nature and quality of teaching, and on the various metrics of quality in higher education.

4.3.1 *Curricula in higher education*

After a great deal of earlier neglect or, at best, descriptive inventory, university curricula have in recent years become the subject of some very interesting and theoretically demanding comparative research, which again owes its orientation to the particular kind of institutional theory/world systems school of thought that John Meyer pioneered. Two studies will serve to highlight this body of work: On the basis of information contained in university catalogs from 1895 to 1994, Frank et al. (2000) investigate “what counts as history” at different times and in different parts of the world. Positing that meanings of history have a great deal to do with the meaning of “society”, they relate shifts in history curricula to changes in prevailing notions of what “society” means, and observe an increasing “homogenization” throughout the world over the course of the twentieth century.

Following a similar theoretical disposition, Gabler and Frank look at the rise and decline of different natural science disciplines over the period 1915-1995, and find their hypothesis confirmed that fields with fixed categories and hierarchies of entities (such as zoology, botany, astronomy) tend to decline, while fields such as physics, geology, biology, chemistry and mathematics that assume dynamic, horizontal networks of entities tend to grow (2005). On a more limited scale, there are specific comparative studies on the internationalization of higher education curricula (Huang 2006) or on such “generic competences” as ethics within the context of the convergence of European higher education (Boni/Lozano 2007).

4.3.2 *Teaching and learning*

Teaching at universities not only seems to play a subordinate role among the criteria for the advancement of faculty, it also does not appear to rate much attention from researchers, especially in an international or comparative context (as an example of the occasional research on university teaching and learning within the context of a single country, see Eggens/van der Werf/Bosker 2008; for an able utilization of existing research for helping professors teach, see Knight 2002). James Forest has tried to remedy this situation for the comparative research literature with his cross-national study of professors’ attitudes

towards teaching and research, which is based on data collected for the Carnegie Foundation in 14 countries. There clearly are, Forest found, distinctly different orientations between the more teaching-oriented and the more research-oriented groups of faculty, especially where the assessment of teaching and the international dimensions of higher education are concerned, but the nature of those differences is remarkably similar across different countries (2002). A more in-depth, qualitative study of faculty perceptions of teaching and research in England and Sweden (Taylor 2008) provides somewhat more insights into the importance of contextual factors, while Nugent's (2004) is one of the few comparative studies focusing on "student careers", i. e., on the pattern and structure of students' learning experience.

4.3.3 *Assuring quality*

The assurance and control of quality in higher education has been a perennial concern for higher education policy, but has received even more attention in recent years as both the quality-based allocation of resources and tendencies towards greater diversity have become salient items on the political agenda. One of the earlier comparative attempts to come to terms with the various facets of the connection between evaluation and quality in higher education was a collection of European studies (European Journal of Education 1997). A more recent comparative project for the "European Higher Education Area" also looks at accreditation as a measure of quality control, but suffers like its predecessor from the absence of a longitudinal dimension (Schwarz/Westerheijden 2004; cf. Westerheijden/Stensaker/Rosa 2007). In the meantime, with some measure of longitudinal extension, university rankings with claims to capture differentials in institutional quality have generated both data and public attention, and have themselves become subjects of research (see notably Hazelkorn 2007, 2008; HEFCE 2008). A good review of recent literature on the subject is Cremonini/Westerheijden/Enders 2008, and Higher Education in Europe has been able to assemble two special issues in recent years (2005, 2007) with a wealth of analytical information on a wide range of methodological and interpretive questions in ranking higher education institutions. Appropriately, Ordorika reminds us that assessment and evaluation in higher education has a political agenda of its own (2004).

5. International research on higher education: An ambivalent agenda

As this review has shown time and again, research on higher education tends to march to different drummers; this is true for research at the national as well as the international level. On the one hand, it pursues questions that arise out of the theoretical and methodological traditions of the social sciences – institutional theory, world systems theory, stratification theory, etc. On the other hand, it takes its cues from the agenda of higher education policy and from the kinds of issues that politically induced changes in higher education systems present – greater diversity, competition, equality, differentiation, decentralization, privatization, etc. The distinction between these two modes of agenda-setting is by no means complete: there is policy-triggered research that generates valuable insights into the general dynamics of social stratification or institutional behavior,

and research guided by social science theory is by no means necessarily irrelevant to an intelligent policy discourse; the studies of entrepreneurial universities (Clark 1998) and of race in US college admissions (Bowen/Bok 1998) are good examples of the former, and the comparative study of women in higher education (Bradley/Ramirez 1996; Bradley/Charles 2004) is a good example of the latter.

Nonetheless, these different modes of setting research agendas – a difference that hardly matters for research in, say, archeology or primate behavior – introduce an element of dissonance and divergence into the study of higher education. One of the indications of this divergence is, as I have already pointed out, the striking phenomenon of an almost complete lack of citational overlap between different communities of higher education researchers; these communities correspond roughly to the two modes of agenda-setting that have been referred to.

Given the high political salience as well as the theoretical fascination of higher education, this divergence is, and will probably remain, unavoidable. Nor is it necessarily a bad thing: there are important instances of spillover and cross-fertilization, and there is a small, but growing number of hybrid projects that are informed and guided both by serious policy controversies and a thoughtful and judicious use of social science theory; the study by Witte (2006) is a case in point.

There is a limit to the degree of crossing over this divide between modes of setting research agendas, but that limit does not yet seem to have been reached. There is, in other words, considerable room for exploring possible gains in understanding that might result from a combination of large scale comparisons over space and time with in-depth studies of the regional, national, and institutional context within which higher education operates. Such a combination could result in significant synergies between the inferential leverage of tightly controlled comparisons and the understanding that results from immersion in rich context.

Instead of somewhat uncomfortably being suspended between policy and science, international research on higher education could thus become a promising and exciting laboratory for the cumulative gains to be derived from thoughtfully bringing together different agendas and research strategies. The considerable intellectual capacity that this review has documented to exist around the world provides an increasingly promising basis for such a next step.

Endnotes

- 1 URL: <http://www.oecd.org/edu> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 2 URL: <http://www.unesco.org> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 3 URL: <http://www.unesco.org/iau/directories/handbook.html>; <http://www.unesco.org/iau/directories/index.html> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 4 URL: <http://scientific.thomsonreuters.com/products/esi/> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 5 URL: <http://www.che-ranking.de> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 6 URL: <http://www.arwu.org> (Download: 15.09.2008).
- 7 URL: <http://www.topuniversities.com/worlduniversityrankings/> (Download: 15.09.2008).

8 URL: <http://www.ireg-observatory.org> (Download: 15.09.2008).

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