

## **Compilation of participants' ideas on challenges and problems**

- *What are the key challenges you see regarding the comparison in the respective perspectives?*
- *What are currently the most striking problems or questions regarding comparative Higher Education Research you would like to discuss?*

### **Research design**

- Challenges with comparative research design: bias towards a set of HE systems (Anglo-Saxon or western democracies) with at least two consequences: 1. selection bias which means that one or a set of countries indirectly serves as a “standard” to which other countries are compared, 2. leaves out great parts of HE systems in the world.
- Comparative research design often tend to select countries for doing research based on fixed networks and not exclusively on methodological relevance for instance why country A and B and C etc is interesting to compare.
- What are the benefits and drawbacks of a matrix research design?
  
- Case selection, unit, level and scale of analysis - danger of constructed populations?
- How to say something about a system in a country when only looking at some institutions?
- The importance of contextualisation - suitability of exported models, theories, concepts and methods
  
- Standardization vs. Flexible approach
- Variable or case orientation
- General model (centralized system) vs. individual approach (allowing different visions)
- Challenges related to scheduling sequential/concurrent phases in an international research design: one team running over time impinges on the ability of another team to start their phase.
- No one is an expert on every system that is being studied. When it comes time to make larger comparisons, there is a danger that much will be missed. How can the comprehensiveness be translated to the general level?

### **Concepts and theories**

- Dealing with different definitions of some concepts.
- Concepts (e.g. affiliation to professional societies and organization).
- Difficulty to define other key concepts besides the generic ones like “networks of governance”, or “new public management”.
- How to tackle differences in the understanding of key concepts (e.g. accountability)?
- How to conceptualize “global change”: can one assume that there are “global trends” in HE which, in order to be shown, demand comparative analysis?
- Theoretical underpinning for analysing inertia versus change
- In the case of governance studies, if facts are not comparable, but only problems are (Nóvoa et al, 2003), how to govern or how to manage tensions between centralized

and decentralized levels of governance, within and across nations and institutions, where relationships are multidimensional, overlapping and fluid in specific contexts?

- Explaining the meaning of practices
- The role of international actors (EU, OECD) as organizational spaces that make things comparable (performance) through a normative and cognitive process (ex: soft governance instruments, such as “good practices”).

### **In the field: Methodological problems and data issues**

- Difficulty to define typologies of HEIs according to secondary data and ex-post analyses through primary data.
- Difficulty to use small universe(s) sampling with a plenty of variable that can be hardly harmonized.
- When can qualitative findings be generalised from the sample to the population?
  
- The significance / impact of differences in interview survey sample among researchers/countries
- Variations in reporting (audio files, transcripts, notes) and their significance for the interpretation
- Cross-national diversity of research ethical issues and protocols
- How to deal with fundamental differences in national data collection practices?
- How to advice local teams in different countries collecting document data for the purposes of another team analysing it? Policy making structures vary across countries, which organisations and documents to chose? Statistical methods for cross-country comparison with 12 or more countries and the interpretation of results.
- How to handle some hundred of variables (quite 700) in an unique matrix with a plenty of filtered questions.
  
- 1 page report / short interview minutes per interviewee - is it enough?
- Questions and wording (e.g. Please list all the professional associations/organizations you belong to)
- In most of the countries English has been used in the survey, and there can be issues with language understanding and standardized questions according to a general understanding. When the survey has been translated there can be issues of misinterpretations, for example.
  
- Overcoming language issues in comparative HE research -> English document database?
- Different documents in each country, with the nuances of the language that are lost to non-native speakers, etc.
- Language issues, lack of document database
- How to analyze and compare policy discourses in different languages?
  
- How to empirically approach relevant causal combinations?
- Studying change as a result of combination of conditions (which is different from saying that changes result from many variables).

- How to move forward from description to exploratory research and causal explanations of the combination of conditions?
- How other information coming from different sort of sources may help – instead of increase the complexity – in the analyses of data.
- How to use survey data together with interview data in a fruitful way?
- How can we quantify qualitative data?
- Giving meaning to quantitative results: the significance of a variable does not guarantee its pertinence.
- Is it wise/necessary to make collected data available to the public domain?
- Cross-institutional assessment tools
- How to consider respondents belonging to a same structure (i.e. a senate) even if two different senators of different universities may have a completely different role in their respective universities.
- Ethics approval issues

### **Analyzing country specificities and differences**

- Taking history into account to understand path dependencies.
- Difficulty to understand to what extent traditional models are currently affecting the HE systems.
- Understanding differential impact of national culture and tradition (also: national context) on organizational and actor behavior (cultural specificity)
- How to define the historical periods in such diverse higher education systems which have such a different evolution?
- How to practically reflect national differences (based on different historical developments) in writing (which has to be done constantly)?
- Understanding the differences between the educational systems of the participating countries.
- The detailed knowledge and understanding of national HE systems in the survey and the different HE cultures.
- How to account for different standing/status of HE in different countries?
- The role that HE plays in the countries in the background of their economic, scientific cultural situations.
- It is a comparative European project where we compare university systems that can differ a great deal. How to compare different systems?
- How to compare without losing the specific characteristics within each country?
- How to compare different systems of education and research without leaving out the specificity of each system?
- Problem of comparing “apples and oranges” (diversity in system/organizational level configuration too large?)

- Recognising local/national singularities of the organisations/systems while identifying universalist dimensions
- Global embeddedness of universities vs. specific national and organizational settings: how to study both as well as their relationship?
- Difficulty to understand which policies are shaping the current HE system and which outcomes they are producing within the national contexts and among HEIs in a same context.
- Is it permissive and does it make sense to analytically extract a common denominator for different (national) provisions?
- The Harvard home syndrome, i.e. adaptation of American models of higher education institutions and systems to societies with very different terms and conditions than the American society.
- A comparison of systems where a change in governance modes is forced by legislative reforms and systems where the governance modes are more in a free floating change within the old nomenclatures. A comparison of universities based on their size, the represented disciplines and special duties mentioned in the legislation.
- Taking society into account to find out about the embeddedness of academic markets
- Comparison of leadership cultures in different systems regardless of formal structures.
- Are there differences between the three main language groups in Finnish higher education? Finnish and Swedish being the national languages of the country and English the main working language for international staff members.

### **Research team dynamics**

- Personal baggage/biases
- Lack of co-operation
- Heterogeneity of schools of thought
- Are there differences between juniors and seniors in their experience of this transformative leadership?
- Are there information and influence asymmetries between different status groups, disciplines, gender and language?
- What make cooperation work (what kind of research design, project structure, level of interdependence etc. as well as other “soft” factors)?
- Projects’ participants responsibility
- Ensuring that country data is safe-guarded from publication or further research by another CRP member.
- Overlaps of research focus can have an affect on publications.
- When a research project has a few different aspects, the teams may end up focusing on different elements of the projects. What each person finds “interesting” or “important” will affect the way they conduct all aspects of the project, and if everyone is looking in a different direction, the data may not be comparable.
- Are the research teams working in parallel, on different aspects, or are they allowing the work of others to inform what they do?

### **On the future of comparative research**

- New practices of exploitation of transnational data are arising. The team of teams develops new practices that young researchers have to learn in order to be – among the social scientists community – one of the very first cohort to work in this new scenario that looks to be the most promising for the future to foster cutting edge results.
- How to combine a multi-method analysis of different science and higher education systems and make something out of it, something that can be valuable to inform policymaking, and at the same time open new questions to the current state of the art.
- How to make HE research into a more common field of research for instance within political science or sociology.
- What are the politically discussed hot HE topics in each country?
- Does it make sense to engage in comparative studies at all without the necessary tools? Can the results attained with unsatisfactory tools be more detrimental than positive?
- Will comparative research only be done in (economically, geographically, politically, socially, religiously) “similar” countries, or can we attempt to make comparisons between countries that seem to have little in common? How can these differences be overcome to find common ground?