

Comparative higher education: potentials and limits

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Abstract. Research on higher education is an object-focussed area based on a broad range of disciplines. The institutional base is often shaky and diverse. Various characteristics, notably the blurred distinction between the scholar and the reflective practitioner, contribute to considerable tensions, though research on higher education enjoys substantial public attention.

Interest in comparative research on higher education grew in recent years and was reinforced by the community of higher education researchers in Europe. As it can be conceptually and methodologically demanding and fruitful, the growing interest could serve as a stimulus for enhancing a common identity and a growing quality. However, few comparative research designs represent the ideal type of setting a research agenda of clearly defined hypotheses to be tested, and if they do so, the study mostly turns out to be too simplistic due to disregard of the complex context. Rather, most comparative projects are exploratory and most productive in providing unexpected insight.

In addition, comparative research faces many problems of a practical nature. Costly research seems to be granted sufficient funds only if it addresses issues of current political concern. Language barriers and limits of field knowledge often lead to a poor provision of information. International collaborative research teams tend to be vulnerable due to, among others, a heterogeneity of schools of thoughts, spiralling costs and different work styles.

The author argues that comparative studies on higher education are most fruitful in destroying conceptual reasoning based on narrow experience; they are a gold mine for the early stages of conceptual restructuring. They are indispensable for understanding a reality shaped by common international trends, reforms based on comparative observation, growing trans-national activities and partial supra-national integration in higher education. Comparative projects can be regarded as theoretically and methodologically most promising if they are based on a semi-structured research design, whereby the strengths of various conceptual approaches in explaining the phenomena are analysed and the researchers systematically deal with the fact that the project is likely to generate surprising information requiring to restructure the initial conceptual framework.

Introduction

Research on higher education tended to focus in the past on individual countries. Irrespective, whether certain reform concepts, the relationships between state and university, management in higher education, curricula, teaching and learning processes or student life and study were under scrutiny, a single country tended to form the basis of analysis or the interpretative framework. International and comparative research remained an exception.

This does not mean, however, that no need for comparative studies was felt. For a long period, this field remained the domain of secondary analyses mixed with policy statements, mostly commissioned or undertaken by international agencies, such as UNESCO, OECD, the World Bank or the Council of Europe. Some of these analyses were impressive, if judged from the researchers' point of view, others shocked as sweeping statements based on sound knowledge of only a few countries and a few concepts and on poor knowledge regarding most relevant countries and most concepts.

In recent years, interest in comparative research on various higher education issues is growing. Basic information is accessible on many issues of higher education in various countries. Implicit comparison is far more widespread than in the past. The knowledge base employed in secondary comparative analyses tends to improve. Last not least, the number of comparative research projects is obviously rising. This trend seems to be most pronounced in Europe (see Neave 1991; Teichler 1992).

The growth of comparative research on higher education can not merely be regarded as a progress in this area of research. Of course, comparison is seen as a basic methodological approach in social sciences, international comparison is considered as indispensable in analysing macro-societal phenomena in higher education, and analysis of any issue in higher education is enriched by broad knowledge from various countries. But comparative research continues to be met with caution or even suspicion, because it often becomes stuck in the collection of curious, minute details, tends to provide sketchy, incomplete knowledge, and seems to lack theoretical and methodological rigor. If, in contrast, projects seem to be theoretically and methodologically well prepared, they tend to limit their views on so few phenomena that they do not pay sufficient attention to the complexity of the different national systems addressed. Finally, the results of comparative research in higher education are frequently employed for polemical debates, ranging from chauvinist benchmarking to claims that the admirable, optimal solution eventually has been implemented in another country which should be copied in one's own country as well, all this accompanied by sweeping statements about the potentials and limits of transferring elements of higher education from one country to another.

This state of affairs calls for taking stock. What are the potentials, what are the limits of comparative research in the area of higher education? What are the possible directions for improvement? Such deliberations cannot be limited to general theoretical and methodological issues of comparison in the humanities and social sciences. This paper is, first, based on the conviction that the specific conditions of higher education research and notably its object-focussed character have to be taken into consideration. Second, it claims that the practical context of research, for example the dominant political

sponsorship of comparative research and the problems of cooperation in international research teams, can not be regarded as merely coincidental, but have to be systematically tackled in research strategies.

Research on higher education

Higher education as an object-focussed area of research

Research on higher education (cf. the overviews in Clark 1984; Research on Higher Education in Europe 1989; Fulton 1992; Teichler 1992) has much in common with other areas of humanistic and social studies defined by the object to be analysed rather than by a discipline. Disciplines tend to claim a certain body of theoretical and methodological knowledge, and scholars held together by a discipline are likely to agree to a certain extent upon appropriate basic approaches in addressing their objects. If disciplines address certain themes regularly, they legitimize that research theories, methods and field knowledge remain within the boundaries typically regarded to be the strength of the respective discipline thereby neglecting relevant phenomena which they are not accustomed to address. Often, common views emerge among scholars of a single discipline addressing a certain thematic area which might be called “paradigms”.

In contrast, areas of knowledge determined by an object tend to

- be strongly driven by the social relevance of their core theme,
- require a substantial breadth and depth of field knowledge,
- cut across disciplines and their favoured thematic areas.

There are object-focussed areas of knowledge with long-standing traditions which grew and stabilized over the years and eventually were considered to be disciplines, though experts claim that their theories and methods kept the typical character of an object-focussed field. Medicine is often viewed as being object-focussed in its character which as a consequence of its sheer size and its social relevance was established as a “discipline”. Higher education, in contrast, is a field of knowledge which remained among the many fields held together by the object of research.

Higher education as a field of research is certainly too small today to be characterized as a discipline. But it could move in the direction of a sub-discipline, if it were coopted by a mother discipline, in such a way, for example, city planning is seen in some countries as a sub-discipline of architecture. Actually higher education as a field of study had moved in this direction in the U.S. There, it is widely regarded as a sub-discipline of education, and a substantial number of departments and schools of education accommodate master and doctoral courses of higher education. In Europe, however, higher education

programmes did not exist at all until recently. In many European countries, “higher education” is not viewed as part of “education”, professionals in the area of higher education were small in number, and tended to come from a bewildering range of fields and professional careers. If a single discipline dominated in some European countries at all, it was law.

A close link to problem-solving

Research on higher education, like many object-focussed areas of research, is characterized by a *close link between research and practical problem-solving*. We note a high degree of identity of similarity of the themes discussed in the public and addressed in research. Actually, research established within institutions of higher education and not be undertaken as a byproduct of teaching in a corresponding field largely depends on public recognition of the relevance of the theme.

It is obvious that a sense of crisis as regards higher education was a major factor or possibly the most important single factor stimulating the promotion and the institutionalisation of higher education research in Europe. A contrasting example supports this point. At a conference held in Zürich in summer 1995, which brought together internationally known higher education researchers and various Swiss experts on higher education, the Swiss participants agreed in assuming that the lack of a sense of crisis in Swiss higher education over the last few decades was a major reason why higher education research was not institutionalized in Switzerland.

Over the last few decades, we noted a change of major themes which were of paradigmatic power both for research and for public debate. We note that some of the key research centres on higher education in Europe were founded when the respective theme became popular. The centres named below survived, however, because they did not exclusively address their core themes and, thus, broadened their thematic areas when their core theme lost popularity.

- The relationship *between educational investment and economic growth* was the key theme of the early 1960s. The major conceptual thrusts of this era were preserved and developed further in Europe by specialists in the field of economics of education at the Université de Bourgogne at Dijon (France). The institute eventually was named Institut de Recherche sur l'Économie de l'Éducation.
- Issues of *higher education expansion, institutional diversification and equality of opportunity* were major political and research themes during the mid and late 1960s. This was reflected in the programme of the Institute of Education of the European Cultural Foundation established in 1965 in Paris. The Institute focussed on higher education, but the name

- similar to the public debate – was not confined to the tertiary sector of education. The Institute was renamed in the 1980s European Institute of Education and Social Policy when a need was felt to broaden its thematic and resource basis.
- Subsequent to the student protests of the late 1960s, stronger *student-centered approaches in curricula, teaching methods, guidance* etc. gave rise to various centres of “staff development”, “onderzoek van onderwijs”, “Hochschuldidaktik”, etc. in the early 1970s. The practical relevance of that theme was so dominant that most of these centres were established primarily for immediate practical purposes, whereas their research activities played a secondary role.
- Concerns about growing *employment problems of graduates* and reconsiderations of curricula in the wake of changing talents, motives and career prospects of the rising number of students became major issues both of higher education policy and higher education research from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s. The Wissenschaftliches Zentrum für Berufs- und Hochschulforschung at the Universität Gesamthochschule Kassel (Germany), founded in 1978, reflects the research priority of that time in its name as well as in one of the major sections of its research programme which addresses various issues of higher education and society.
- *Governance and management* of higher education, combined with efforts of *evaluation and quality control*, emerged as a key topic of higher education in many European countries since about the mid-1980s. The establishment of the Centrum voor Studies van het Hoger Onderwijsbeleid at the Twente Universiteit in Enschede (Netherlands) in 1984 reflects this new emphasis in research.

We are currently in a stage of reorientation of major issues, and we are not yet certain about the next major focus of higher education policy as well as higher education research. I tend to predict that we might consider *internationalization* of higher education as the next theme which gives rise to a new focus of both higher education policy and higher education research (see Smith, Teichler and van der Wende 1994; Blumenthal, Goodwin, Smith and Teichler 1996).

The close link between themes of public debate and research does not necessarily mean that research on higher education was completely driven by presumed needs of practical problem solving. The researchers themselves often were active agents in shaping the public problem awareness, and the public definitions of the various “problems” can be viewed as prototype examples of a scientification of society: “educational investment and economic growth”, “equality”, “diversification” and “output assessment” could

only become major issues of public debates because research was genuinely involved in the public definition of the related practical problems.

The blurred distinction between practitioners and researchers

The close paradigmatic links between the practitioners and the researchers in higher education are certainly due to the fact that higher education is characterized by a relatively vague distinction between the researcher and the practitioner. There is hardly any other area in research, in which both the ordinary persons actively observing the field of and the decision-makers possibly interested in the results of research have such a complex knowledge of the field itself and such a high intellectual competence. On the one hand, this enriches the state of knowledge. To a large extent, we owe the sophisticated state of knowledge on higher education and the potentials of change based on that knowledge to the reflective potential of the professionals in this area. On the other hand, many seemingly knowledgeable publications on higher education written by these practitioners lack the conceptual and methodological rigor the authors would strive for in their prime area of expertise, while the researchers on higher education often face difficulties in convincing the practitioners that research in this area provides an added value to the reflections of the practitioners. Paradoxically, the academic profession trying to persuade society that systematic scholarship and research is superior to the practitioners' experience, is most sceptical about the value of scholarship and research, if it comes to their practical turf, i.e. higher education.

A closer look reveals that this relatively vague distinction between the researcher and the practitioner of higher education has led to a continuum of roles between the professional higher education researcher at the one end of the scale and the lay person on the other. We observe a wide range of "experts" on higher education in the centre of this scale who are neither clearly professionals nor lay persons as far as the field of knowledge is concerned. Many associations, such as the European Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (EARDHE) or the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) on the European level or, for example, the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) on national level, i.e. in the United Kingdom, aim at establishing communication among a broad range of experts, i.e. comprising any mix of amateurs and professionals in higher education research. This holds also true for the majority of international higher education journals based in Europe, for example "Higher Education in Europe" (published by UNESCO), "Higher Education Management" (published by the Programme on Institutional Management in Higher Education of the OECD), "Higher Education Policy" (published by the International Association of Universities) and "Tertiary Education and Management" (published

by EAIR). Only, the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), established in 1988 and comprising a membership of less than 200 scholars, aims to be a professional body of higher education researchers. Similarly, the journal "Higher Education" is the only international periodical exclusively devoted to higher education research.

One should bear in mind, though, that research on higher education varies substantially between countries in terms of the size and the role it plays. In some countries, we observe a sizeable community of scholars in this area, whereas in others systematic information on higher education is merely the by-product of regular statistical reports and coincidental expert reporting. There are no systematic comparative studies available on the state of higher education research in industrial societies. Recent studies on the state of educational research undertaken by the European Commission and by the OECD do not substitute for this lack, because their emphasis on educational research in general is more likely to provide an overview of the extent to which educational researchers, i.e. specialists of the school system, cast an eye over higher education than on the state of the art of research focussing on higher education.

If a systematic study on the state of research on higher education in Europe was undertaken, I would suggest to examine the following hypothesis: The size and institutional strength of research on higher education in a given country seems to depend more strongly on the way administrators, rather than scholars from various disciplines, look at the potentials of research on higher education in comparison to their own practitioners' knowledge. Higher education as research is more likely to flourish, if belief in the "almighty" governmental or institutional administrator is limited and, thus, the generation of new and systematic knowledge is accepted as a possible source of wisdom. Of course, this is not the only factor which comes into play.

The systematic incompleteness of higher education research

Research on higher education differs from that of most other object-focussed social science areas, because it is systematically incomplete. It can not fully cover the complexity of knowledge in its area, and researchers of higher education, as a rule, have inferior knowledge in some dimensions of their analysis than various persons active in the area they analyse, i.e. the knowledge of the disciplines and interdisciplinary fields. Research on higher education does not address the core dimensions of engineering or literature. Rather, researchers on higher education are, as a rule, experts of the "non-genuine" dimensions of higher education, if regarded from the point of view of the other scholars.

Research on higher education has to confront the practitioners with the relevance of the “non-genuine” aspects of higher education: for example, the role social skills play in the work and careers of engineers and that graduates of disciplines have to be skilled in mastering their professional life. Or that success of artists does not merely depend on artistic creativity, but also on an understanding of art history, the economic and social conditions of galleries, and on access to studios and other financial means in the early stages of their artistic careers. Furthermore, research on higher education has to address the principal tension between scientific reasoning and professional problem-solving, the strengths and limits of governance by an academic guild, or the roles higher education administrators play as facilitators or preventors of academic progress.

This does not mean, that research on higher education just has to consider the gap between the knowledge basis of the disciplines and that of higher education research as insurmountable from the outset. Research on science (history of science, sociology of science, etc.) tends to move some steps further in bridging this gap than research on higher education. Also, we note various efforts of bridging those gaps by representatives of the respective disciplines moving to higher education research in advanced stages of their careers or higher education researchers closely cooperating with representatives of the respective discipline in their process of conducting research.

The Encyclopedia of Higher Education, edited by Clark and Neave (1992), aims to cover both, research on higher education and state of the art reports on the character of the various academic disciplines. The fourth volume comprises overview articles on more than 30 disciplinary areas. Valuable as these articles are for understanding the disciplines, they hardly refer at all to the state of art of research on higher education or research on science. Thus, the Encyclopedia clearly demonstrates the lack of communication between key persons of the respective academic disciplines reflecting the state of their discipline on the one hand and on the other the specialists of higher education research and of research on science, who both address the academic disciplines from a meta-perspective.

The shaky balance of communication with the actors concerned

Research on higher education is relevant for a broad range of actors in its field of expertise. Higher education is generally assumed to be extraordinarily decentralized in its decision-making, respecting the influence of a broad range of actors, and allowing academics and students an exceptional degree of freedom in shaping their activities of research, teaching and learning themselves. Whatever type of governance prevails in any given country, higher education is characterized by limits of power and influence of any single type of actor,

by soft modes of governance which has to legitimize itself to a considerable extent by intellectual persuasion even though we observe many recent efforts to strengthen administrative power and to substitute time-consuming deliberation and decision-making processes by standardized practices.

This multi-actor configuration provides ample opportunities for researchers of higher education. They might observe the concerns and interests of the various actors involved and contribute to an enhancement of knowledge regarding issues which are most interesting and most controversial. What we often note, however, are research projects which are focussed so strictly on the perspective of the actor stimulating and sponsoring the individual project that the results are bound to be biased, because governments and top administrators of institutions are obviously in better position to sponsor research than, for example, students or scholars. Research on higher education, thus, has to counter-balance the uneven potentials of the various actors to commission research. The more the researchers succeed in taking into consideration the diverse perspectives of the various actors in the research design and the interpretation of the findings, the more research on higher education is conceptually appropriate as well as potentially useful for practical problem-solving.

The thematic pattern of higher education research

As already noted above, research on higher education is primarily defined by the object of its analysis. Disciplines do not have a *raison d'être* in their own right when it comes to research in higher education, rather one asks what they can contribute to understand higher education.

The disciplines frequently named as contributing to higher education as a field of knowledge are history, law, economics and business studies, sociology, psychology, political science and education. Experts from other disciplines might be involved in higher education research as well, but their disciplinary contribution tends to be that of field knowledge not that of constituting the theories and methods of higher education research.

In some publications providing an overview on higher education as a field of research we note categories of disciplines alongside those of sub-disciplines and object areas of higher education research. This holds true, for example, for Clark (1984) and Clark and Neave (1992). The latter publication differs from the former in choosing a larger number of individual categories in the domain of governance, management and organization, thus reflecting the mood of research of higher education in the late 1980s and early 1990s, i.e. putting prime emphasis on governance and management issues of higher education.

Most categories employed in bibliographies and in overview publications on higher education research address major object areas (such as admissions, students, graduates or research) or cross-disciplinary thematic areas of

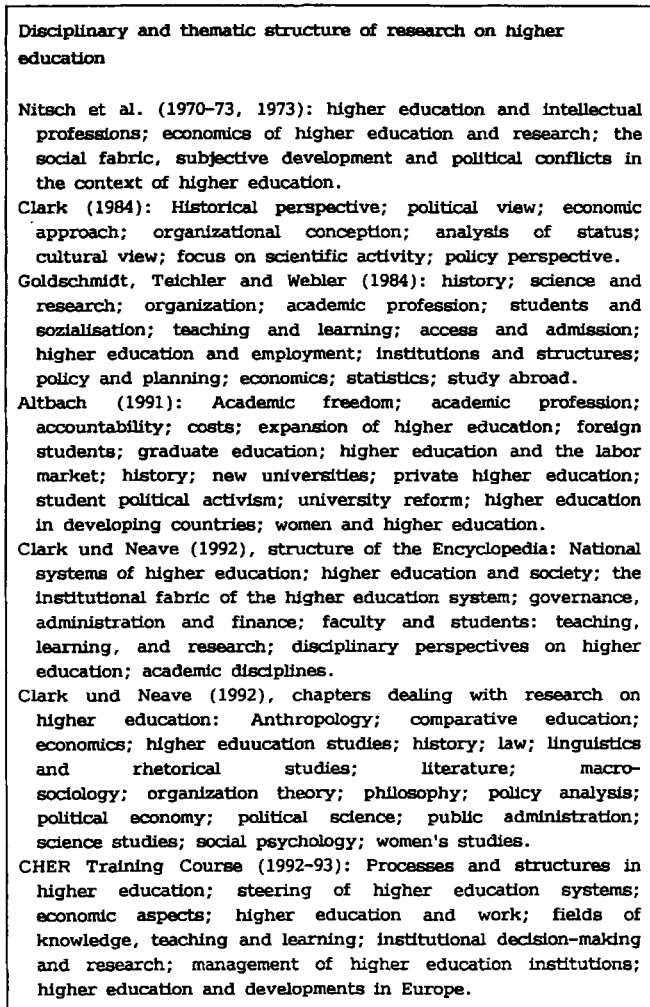


Figure 1. Disciplinary and thematic structure of research on higher education.

humanistic and social studies (such a organizational theory). Figure 1 shows a bewildering variety of classifications and clearly indicates that higher education as a field of research is not yet characterized by a high degree of paradigmatic consensus.

It certainly would be fruitful to strive for a generally accepted "map" of higher education research. This would facilitate the establishment of consistent information systems, the provision of overviews on the state of knowledge. I suggest to group to four categories each of which tends to be affiliated to only a few of the relevant disciplines and each describe relatively well

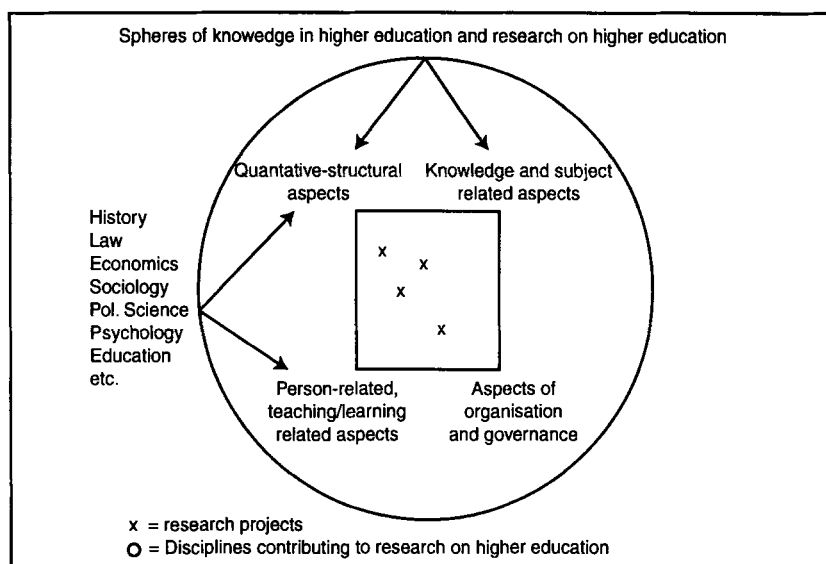


Figure 2. Spheres of knowledge in higher education and research on higher education.

the areas of knowledge individual researchers in this field can successfully master. I suggest to call them “spheres of knowledge in higher education” (see Figure 2):

- quantitative-structural aspects of higher education,
- knowledge and subject-related aspects of higher education,
- person-related as well as teaching and research-related aspects of higher education,
- aspects of organisation and governance of higher education.

Typical *quantitative-structural aspects* are access, admission, elite and mass higher education, diversification, types of higher education institutions, duration of study programmes, graduation, educational and employment opportunities, job prospects, income and status, returns for educational investment, appropriate employment, mobility. Economists and sociologists tend to address these aspects most frequently.

Major *knowledge and subject-related aspects* are disciplinarity versus interdisciplinarity, studium generale, academic versus professional emphasis, quality, skills and competences, utilization of competences, overqualification. These areas are often addressed by experts from education as well as various sub-disciplines addressing science (history, sociology etc.).

Some *person and process-related aspects* might suffice to characterize this sphere: motivation, communication, counselling and guidance, didactics, learning style, assessment and examinations. Education and psychology are

the key disciplines addressing this domain, but sociology plays some role as well.

Examples for *organisation and governance-related aspects* might be planning, administration, management, power and consensus, decision-making, efficiency and effectiveness, funding, resource allocation. Law, political science, economics, public and business administration are major disciplines involved.

Individual research projects might fall in the domain of a single of those four spheres. In that case, we could place the projects close to one of the corners of the square shown in Figure 2. I would claim, however, that most demanding research projects of higher education, i.e. those not overlooking the complexity of the theme under consideration, address more than one of those spheres concurrently. These projects are placed more closely to the center or to the dotted lines dividing the square shown in Figure 2. For example, research projects on graduate employment, as a rule, have to take into consideration both quantitative-structural and knowledge and subject-oriented spheres of the theoretical body of knowledge of higher education research, and they have to combine knowledge from various disciplines, notably economics, sociology and education; in addition, they have to be based on field knowledge about the various fields of study and occupations (cf. Brennan, Kogan and Teichler 1995).

Demanding higher education research, thus, has an integrative task on two levels. It has to make use of the theories, paradigms and methods of the various disciplines in its conceptual development, and it has to make use of various knowledge spheres of research on higher education in establishing the design of research projects and in conducting the subsequent processes of analysis. If research on higher education tries to draw from single disciplines, paradigms and from single spheres of higher education research, this might be appropriate for a minority of themes. In most cases, however, this leads to an artificially narrow scope of the subject which is not suitable for striking the balance between theoretical insight and a sufficiently complex understanding of the object of analysis.

This proposal of structuring higher education research according to topics and of employing various disciplines and areas of knowledge certainly is not shared by all experts in this field. It is based upon the belief that research on higher education should not accept the typical divisions of disciplines, methods and field knowledge which allow for in-depth concepts and methods based on narrow definitions of expertise. Higher education research is bound to remain esoteric if it does not strive for combining the knowledge of at least some disciplines, some methodological approaches and some areas of field knowledge in order to do justice to the complexity of the theme under

consideration. For example, study and career motives of students are bound to be misunderstood, if they are only analyzed from the point of view of either economics or psychology or if the knowledge base is only curricula or only future salaries and job roles.

Individual options of researchers and institutional condition of research on higher education

We note, however, that the individuals conducting research on higher education differ strikingly from each other as regards

- the duration of involvement in research on higher education: short phases versus long career-shaping phases,
- the extent to which their professional identity is linked to a discipline or a topic in the domain of higher education,
- whether they understand their research activity as more theoretically oriented or more practice-oriented or whether they strive for any combination of these thrusts,
- the degree of cooperation with other scholars in research and the institutional basis of research: whether research is undertaken by individuals, in project teams, in small continuous research groups, in sizeable research institutions, etc.

It might be justified to cluster the variety of options visible in Europe around five different types of approaches and institutional conditions of research on higher education (see Figure 3).

(1) *The discipline-department based occasional researchers on higher education*: Scholars rooted in disciplines potentially constitutive for research on higher education might decide to analyse issues of higher education. As a rule, they devote a part of their academic work or a certain period of their professional life to this thematic area. As a matter of procedure, the number of scholars opting for this thematic area tends to grow when higher education is en vogue in public debate and research and tends to decrease when other issues draw public attention.

In the framework of discipline-based and department-based research, it might be virtuous to limit the scope of research to the specific strengths of the discipline, irrespective whether this will be viewed as too narrow and misleading by a higher education specialist. First, the discipline and department based researcher might not even become aware of these limitations, and, second, even if the range of other approaches were known to her or him, she or he might deliberately remain within the limits of the respective discipline because she or he feels safer and more qualified there and might prefer to communicate the results of the research activities to colleagues through familiar publication channels. Also, it is widely assumed that the discipline promises

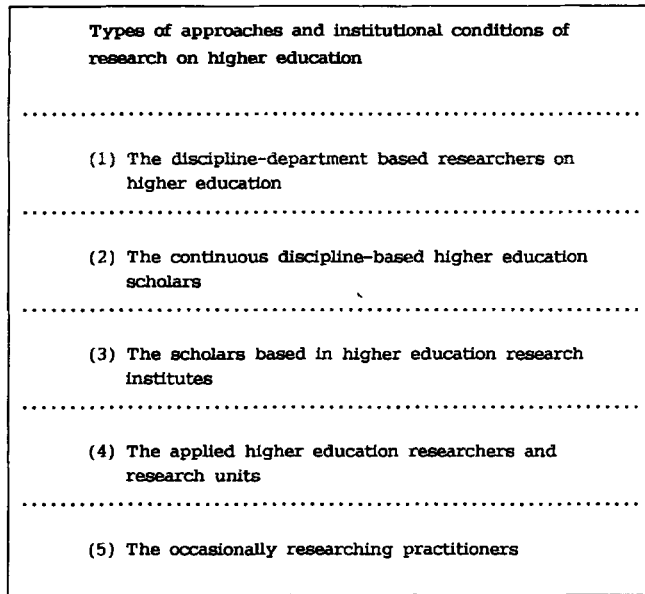


Figure 3. Types of approaches and institutional conditions of research on higher education.

best career advancement opportunities for those scholars who remain consistently within the boundaries of their discipline but demonstrate flexibility and breadth in the issues analysed in individual research projects, because such a research strategy underscores the broad applicability of the prevailing theories and methods of the respective discipline. We might name interesting and stimulating examples of this occasional involvement in higher education (for example, Marsh, Thurow, Luhmann and Habermas), but we also know many examples of disciplinary approaches narrowing the scope on higher education like a straitjacket.

(2) *The continuous discipline-based higher education scholars*: Some scholars are based within departments and their respective disciplinary teaching and research tasks and organisational structures in the same way as those addressed above, but in contrast to them became specialists of higher education. They devote all or most of their research activities to this thematic area, and they integrate the roles of a typical discipline-oriented scholar with that of an established expert of a certain thematic area. This option might lead them somewhat away from the mainstream of their discipline but they aim to strike the balance as far as acceptance both by colleagues in their respective discipline and by higher education researchers is concerned. As a rule, they are less inclined to take over assignments in consultancy and applied research than higher education researchers addressed below. In the past, some scholars

representing this type played or still play today a prominent role in “fertilizing” higher education research (for example Ben-David, Clark, Trow and Becher). Again, we also know many scholars in this domain who excel in terms of a vast knowledge of the field without contributing significantly to theoretical and methodological improvement of higher education research.

(3) *The scholars based in higher education research institutes*: Researchers being active within university research institutes which focus completely or to a substantial proportion on higher education research certainly play a key role in strengthening higher education as an object-focussed area of research. They differ from the above-named types of scholars by continuously cooperating with other researchers in the same thematic area, and the success of their work can not be based solely on academic reputation within a single disciplinary area.

As a rule, key researchers at such institutions are expected to succeed in the acquisition of substantial amounts of research grants. They are in the position to explore the potential of large-scale projects, both in terms of the complexity of research design and the amount of empirical work load involved: They can also play a key role in undertaking integrative efforts, both in terms of contributing to the concepts which are based on various disciplines and various schools of thought as well as in terms of designing research projects to cut across the major thematic spheres of higher education research. It is therefore not merely coincidental that senior scholars of the large ones among those types of institutions, notably Teichler (Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work, Kassel) and Van Vught (Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, Enschede), played a key role in the establishment and stabilization of the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers in close cooperation with scholars such as Kogan (Centre for the Evaluation of Public Policy and Practice at Brunel University) and Neave (International Association of Universities) who, based in different academic settings, pursued a similar thrust towards higher education as a field of research.

These institutions have to strike the balance between academic reputation and practical relevance. Most research grants are provided with the expectation that information generated through research should help to solve practical problems, or they might be expected to cover expert functions which cannot be called research: direct evaluation activities, expert assessments, consultancy etc. As a consequence, a substantial number of publications are of an applied nature with at most indirect and remote contributions to the theoretical and methodological development of higher education research. There is an obvious danger of an “application drift”. We, therefore, note deliberate strategic efforts on the part of those scholars and institutions not to yield to those pressures of application and consultancy. Instead, efforts are made on the

one hand to play a distinct role in research sponsored for application purposes and in consultancy by drawing visibly from the theoretical and methodological basis of this field and on the other hand to make use in their core research activities of the field experiences and the resources drawn from those applied activities

(4) *The applied higher education researchers and research units:* The numbers of individual researchers or those based at units or institutions in charge of applied research or being primarily a service unit which incorporates research functions is certainly higher in Europe than the number of individual researchers based at higher education research institutes named above. In various European countries, public research and development institutes often serve these former functions. Some of them might be specialized on higher education; the department specialized on conducting large-scale surveys on students of the Hochschul-Information-System GmbH in Hannover (Germany) is a prominent example of that type. Others are sections of a larger institutional setting, for example national statistical offices, state institutes specialized in education or labour market matters. In recent years, some institutions of higher education established units for institutional research similarly to the well-established practice at many institutions of higher education in the U.S.

The prime emphasis of this kind of higher education research is to collect systematic information relevant for practical decision-making, and this is frequently connected to other service functions. The individual researchers at those institutions might be quite successful in contributing to the academic enhancement of higher education research beyond the major scope of their institutions, but this is a spin-off rather than the result of deliberate institutional strategy.

(5) *The occasionally researching practitioners:* We note a growing number of persons in Europe who are primarily in charge of administrative and service functions in higher education, but are interested and actually succeed in spending part of their time conducting systematic studies on higher education. The borderline between scholars and practitioners in higher education discussed above is not only fuzzy because of the extraordinary reflective competences of the practitioners in this area, but also because many university presidents and heads of administration, experts in government, administrators, guidance counsellors, international officers etc. enjoy to expand their own job role or sometimes to prepare their future role in the direction of regular research activities.

Unlike the U.S., we did not note until recently any general climate in European countries encouraging "institutional research" and professional enhancement of higher education administrators by means of undertaking

research in their area of expertise. In recent years, the number of practitioners seems to grow who aim to be partially researchers in their domain. Again, we observe that a significant number of them contributes to an improvement of the conceptual basis of higher education research while others show their strength in the application of existing concepts on information-gathering in a pragmatic manner.

The diversity of involvement and the different roles played in higher education research might be regarded as creative. Most experts in this area agree, however, that the overall scene of higher education research can not be judged as well-functioning. We note deficiencies of information and communication across disciplines, thematic specializations, and socio-political as well as paradigmatic thrusts. Cooperation could be improved in order to cross-fertilize the different areas of expertise. Last not least, we note a clear dominance of support for projects of an applied nature which endangers the conceptual and methodological improvement of research on higher education.

The comparative dimension of higher education research

Growing involvement in comparative research

Many higher education researchers in various European countries nowadays consider their colleagues all over Europe as their academic community. Neither the colleagues within their individual countries nor the global "community" of higher education researchers play an equally important role. The valuable contributions of European conferences for trans-national communication and the cooperation of higher education researchers in European academic and professional bodies reinforce this prevailing European emphasis. Three factors might help to explain this state of affairs.

First, in most individual European countries, the number of higher education researchers is small. In the majority of European countries, the numbers remain beyond the minimum size required to form a mutually challenging academic community. Therefore, exchange of thought on a broader basis can be regarded as essential.

Second, mutual stimulation in international research cooperation in the areas of humanities and social sciences is more likely if the research approaches and the themes to be studied do not differ too extremely from each other. As comparative research is more stringent if a few strategic variables are different while other conditions are more or less alike, cooperation among researchers from different countries is more productive if they note a considerable degree of common conditions. In fact, higher education research in various European countries seems to be based on a common notion, in con-

trast to prevailing research approaches in the U.S., that analyses of the inner processes within higher education institutions always should be reflected in their macro-societal context.

Third, the growing “regional” political cooperation in Europe strongly affects research in this area. Researchers are more often expected to be experts not only on a single country but also on Europe as a whole when practitioners call for information, whatever the practical interests are – benchmarking, cross-fertilization of thought for reform, search for common solutions in Europe or improvement of trans-national cooperation.

Methodological issues

Methodological issues of comparative research in various areas of the humanities and social sciences have been so often elaborated in a systematic manner that this theme seems to be almost exhausted. But we note that the methodological debates continue and challenge well-established views about potentials, limits and proper methodologies of comparative research.

Higher education research has not been strongly involved in methodological debate on comparative approaches. Among the internationally known experts in this field, Altbach (1985; 1988) may be named as the only scholar who repeatedly addressed concepts, methods as well as available knowledge and information resources in comparative higher education. Other experts occasionally focussed on the potentials and problems in comparative higher education, in some cases in publications dealing with the state of higher education research (for example Clark 1984; Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994), in other cases as part of the methodological reflection in the framework of individual research projects on a specific theme. Higher education, however, has been frequently discussed as a theme in the conceptual and methodological literature of comparative education (cf. the overviews in Mitter 1992; Schriewer 1995), because higher education is generally conceived to be one of the sub-areas addressed in educational research by the educational researchers themselves.

The aim of this section is not to discuss the details of the methodological debate on comparative research. Rather, major issues will be summarized which might form a frame of reference for discussing the problems which comparative higher education is facing (see Figure 4).

First, comparative research in higher education, i.e. research addressing phenomena of higher education in more than one “culture”, “society” or “nation” systematically or in a single one in comparative perspective, *does not differ in its logic from research undertaken within a country*. It pursues the typical logic of comparison which is universal for research striving to

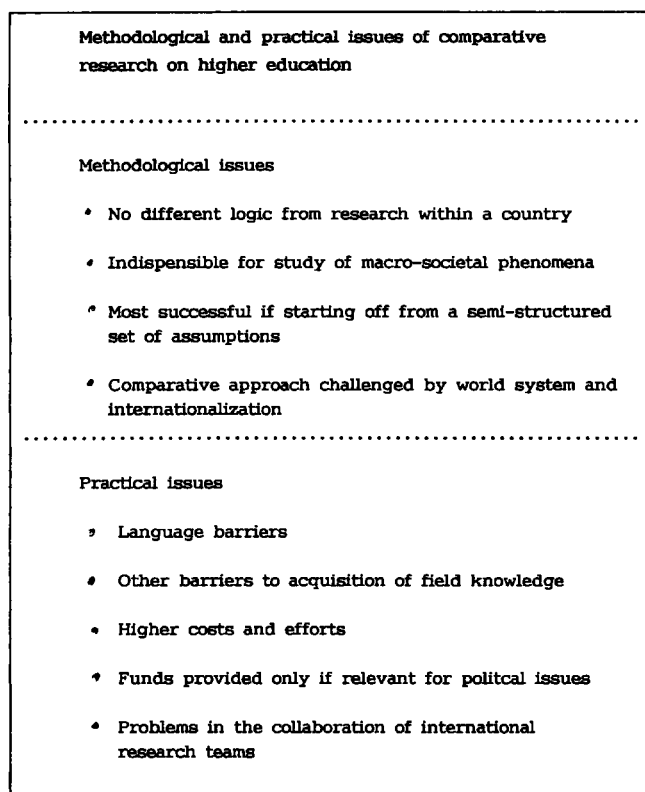


Figure 4. Methodological and practical issues of comparative research on higher education.

identify common elements and differences as well as to test hypotheses on causal relations.

Second, comparative approaches are *indispensable if macro-societal phenomena of higher education are the topic of research*. For example, analyses of the relationships between universities and government in a single country remain idiosyncratic if they do not explicitly or implicitly address other characteristics of universities and other characteristics of government, i.e. alternatives which, as a rule, are best provided through comparative analysis. In macro-societal studies, each society forms a single case, and research including more than one case would be comparative. Comparative research addressing institutions or individuals also tends to refer to the macro-societal level in order to explain why a certain 'activity', 'strategy' or 'mechanism' does not cause the same results in one country that it causes in another country.

Third, most theoretically demanding and empirically successful comparative research on higher education *starts off from a semi-structured set of*

assumptions. It aims to combine the strength of an initial reference to certain theoretical assumptions and of phrasing a clear set of hypotheses on the one hand with the “gold mine” strength of comparative studies on the other in order to maximize the chance of getting surprised by completely unexpected findings which might call into questions the prior assumptions.

On the one hand, we constantly observe that comparative approaches aiming to analyse a small number of phenomena and to test causal relationships among a limited set of variables tend to produce completely dissatisfactory results. The results of such approaches are often regarded as trivial and misleading. Scholars who claim to have found common trends or certain causal relations of universal relevance, therefore are frequently criticized for the neglect of particular aspects of higher education system, processes and phenomena (see Mitter 1992, p. 1790). If, in contrast, a wealth of additional variables is taken into consideration in order to explain the findings, the quality of the study eventually depends more strongly on the way the researcher handles those variables referred to in the interpretation of the findings than the few variables presumed to be controlled systematically in the original design.

On the other hand, we often note a too strong reliance on description and collection of curiosities as well as on inductive processes of establishing concepts in comparative studies on higher education. Therefore, studies on societal phenomena in other countries are often criticised as being prone to a-theoretical accumulations of unexplained facts.

Both directions of critique call for a solution on the part of concept-based comparative research which aims from the outset to be open for the specific strength of comparative research, namely that the findings might destroy our prior conceptual map on which the research design was based. Thus, the researchers are in a position both to test their prior assumptions and to enrich their concept heuristically with the help of unexpected findings.

Fourth, comparative research on higher education has to take into consideration that its underlying rationale, i.e. the existence of relatively closed entities of single higher education systems based on distinct “nations”, “societies” or “cultures” is challenged. Two intertwined developments have to be taken into consideration. On the one hand, *comparative research might loose its topic*, if the “world”, the “global society” etc. turns out to be an appropriate concept. On the other hand, the trans-national activities in higher education, for example staff and student mobility, graduate mobility, international knowledge transfer, curricular coordination through international networks, matters of recognition etc., might spread so much that they overshadow the remaining national system characteristics.

We obviously note tendencies of a global spread of standardized educational models (see Dierkes, Weiler and Berthoin Antal 1987), but also persis-

tent peculiarities of higher educational systems and distinct national political options pointed out after careful comparative analysis (Teichler 1988). We note concurrent and intertwined processes of internationalization and indigenization, of supra-national integration and intra-national diversification (see Schriewer 1995). We are not yet certain whether we head towards "regionalisation" (see Blumenthal et al. 1996) in higher education, i.e. regions such as Western Europe, the "Pacific Rim", "Africa", etc. forming similar entities of higher education as nation states did for the last two centuries, or towards internationalization. And we note increasing trans-national activities in higher education which eventually might not be viewed as "trans" anymore, but as "intra" if the most important system boundaries were not any longer those of nations, but that of larger regions or if they were substituted by the world society.

It seems premature, though, to conclude that the national entity "higher education system" is on the verge of being more or less substituted by an abundance of trans-national activities and by supra-national integration. In analysing developments of patterns of the higher education systems in industrial societies I came to the conclusion the trends and policies neither follow consistently

- assumed common functional demands, nor
- specific targeted political philosophies, nor
- idiosyncratic assumptions of the characteristics of a national higher education system,

but rather tend to be reflected policy options or de facto compromises between these three extremes, whereby the options do not tend to converge but continue to be varied (Teichler 1988). We also came to the conclusion in a recent study that views and activities of the academic profession are more diverse according to country than according to discipline (see Maassen 1996). Yet, comparative research on higher education can not continue to treat common international trends merely as common elements in different countries, as it was conceived in traditional comparative studies, and it can not treat trans-national phenomena anymore as being outside the domain of comparative research as, for example, Goedegebuure and van Vught (1994) argued. New conceptual frameworks are required.

Practical issues of comparative higher education research

International comparative research faces more problems of a practical nature than research addressing the respective phenomena within a national framework. Other factors play a stronger role than those of the logic of research, i.e. social, human, economic and organisational factors. They tend to be regarded as coincidental but certain constraints affecting comparative research appear

so regularly that they are not due to not having realized optimum designs and research conditions. It seems appropriate to ask whether certain conditions have to be treated as systematic constraints which should be taken into consideration in realistic research approaches.

First, one of the most obvious problems in comparative research is that of *language barriers*. There are few designs of comparative research projects which are not influenced by constraints in terms of language proficiency. We often observe that the focus of research is chosen in such a way that the researchers can cope with the theme on the basis of superficial language knowledge. For example, social statistics and completely standardized surveys play a more prominent role in comparative analyses than in national studies, because information on different countries can be taken into consideration without any or only with marginal knowledge of the respective language. Also, the choice of countries to be included in a study often does not follow systematic criteria, but rather that of knowledge of the respective language.

In research on higher education in Europe we note a striking imbalance of knowledge both on factual developments of higher education and research on higher education in various European countries. Often, developments of higher education in certain countries become internationally known only when the governments and the researchers of the respective country turn to increased publication activities in English. For example, issues in higher education and related research in Finland and Norway are more often referred to internationally, since governments publish frequently in English and since the Research Unit for Sociology of Education of the University of Turku and the Norwegian Institute for Studies in Research and Higher Education publish a substantial proportion of their findings in English.

Admittedly, there are noteworthy exceptions: some scholars succeed in acquiring an admirable knowledge of higher education in a large number of European countries. The frequent lack of knowledge of various European languages, however, has adversely affected secondary, syncretical studies on general trends and problems in higher education. A close look at those studies often reveals that their key arguments are based on in-depth knowledge of a few countries, superficial knowledge of a few other countries, and a deplorable lack even of minimum knowledge of many countries the language of which are not widely known. Substantial efforts have been made, however, in recent years to stimulate overview publications on higher education in various European countries, to establish European-wide cooperation among experts, and to undertake collaborative projects in order to overcome language barriers (see for example Neave and van Vught 1991; Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen and Rinne 1996).

In contrast, research on higher education seldom has opted for another solution widespread in some areas of the humanities and social sciences, i.e. the establishment of area studies: researchers specialize on a certain country or a certain group of countries. This is obviously a convincing solution for coping with language barriers and for ensuring a broad contextual knowledge of any theme addressed. However, area studies tend to remain factual, because area specialists have to spend substantial time and energy for language acquisition and basic field knowledge and tend to cover so many thematic areas that little room is left for the acquisition of in-depth knowledge of related theoretical and methodological issues. Additionally, we often note that scholars involved in area studies lack field knowledge of their home country and thus, are not in the position to systematically confront their knowledge of the country to be analysed with a similar level of knowledge of the home country.

Second, comparative research faces more *problems* than social research within a single country *in acquiring sufficient field knowledge* for other reasons than limited language proficiency. In undertaking comparative research we become aware of the fact that in the past we have acquired substantial knowledge of many themes and related areas to be analysed but frequently not in a systematic manner. Rather it was accidentally absorbed during our life course through daily observation, reading newspapers, discussions with other persons etc. In comparative projects, we have to acquire respective knowledge of other countries in a targeted manner and as part of our precious research time and resources. Even if we like to acquire this knowledge and can afford to do so in the framework of our research projects, we note that a substantial proportion of the relevant knowledge is not accessible to quick and targeted learning but is more likely to be acquired by extended observation or active involvement.

Third, *costs and efforts are higher*, *ceteris paribus*, in comparative research than in research focussing on one's home country. Additional costs and efforts have to be borne to overcome the language barriers and the lack of in-depth information discussed above. In addition, various further costs are likely to be incurred in the process of gathering the key information for the respective research project, for example, for travel of researchers or decentralized management of surveying.

We often note that due to these constraints comparative research projects limit their scope in terms of areas to be covered or cases to be analysed. This might seriously damage the value of the results of comparative research.

Fourth, comparative projects requiring substantial resources are more likely to be funded if they are believed to be as *relevant for current political issues*. Actually, most major comparative projects on higher education requiring substantial resources have been funded by governmental agencies not by research

promotion agencies. This obviously has an impact on the issues addressed in comparative research. In addition, large-scale comparative projects might be so strongly driven by expectations to collect data within a limited range, within a short time and for certain practical purposes that their value for the improvement of the conceptual and methodological basis of higher education research is bound to be weak.

Fifth, efforts to overcome various of the above named shortcomings of comparative research through the establishment of international research teams turn out to be successful in some cases. It is obvious, though, that *cooperation among researchers is more difficult to achieve in international projects* than in national projects. An international team of researchers is more likely to be heterogeneous than a national team, as far as theories, preferred methods and preferred issues to be analysed are concerned. Communication is likely to be more complicated for a variety of reasons, for example distance, language barriers and communication modes.

As will be discussed below, different strategies of cooperation among researchers might be employed. On the one hand, we note internationally collaborative projects initiated and steered by a single or few researchers whereby the others merely play the role of collecting information according to a standardized frame. This strategy might ensure the most consistent research design but runs the risk that the specific characteristics of the countries addressed are not sufficiently taken into consideration in the project design and that the procedures might preclude the gathering of relevant surprising information which otherwise could have led to a readjustment of the project design. On the other hand, the strategy of establishing an integrated international research team might enforce far-reaching compromises in the concept and the design of the research project which could dilute the consistency of the research approach and possibly the comparability of findings.

Select research experiences

Reference to personal experience

Opportunities and limitations of comparative studies, in this case in the area of higher education, can best be understood, if we analyse respective experiences gathered in major comparative research projects. Documentation of these issues, however, tends to be sketchy and selective. Researchers typically disclose only the concepts and methods predominantly pursued and sketch only briefly the major limitations. They hardly describe the practical conditions of the acquisition of the grant, the alternative strategies of research collaboration initially intended but not realized, the possible options not pur-

sued because of lack of funds or limited language proficiency, unpleasant experiences of collaboration., etc.; in short: the interaction of various systematic and practical factors shaping the research processes eventually chosen. Therefore, I hope to stimulate further debates on possible improvements of comparative research on higher education by summarizing respective experiences gathered within projects I happened to be involved in.

I shall only select relatively complex projects which comprised relatively large numbers of researchers and required substantial resources. This does not call into question that comparative projects based on smaller budgets and typically on part-time involvement of researchers from various countries for a short period might not be very informative and successful (see for example Clark 1985; Neave and van Vught 1991; Meek, Goedegebuure, Kivinen and Rinne 1996).

Implementation of higher education reforms in Europe

The comparative study on problems incurred in the process of implementing higher education reforms in Europe during the 1970s addressed the obvious experience that the achievements of most high flying reforms ideas seemed to be modest. The study was expected to make aware of the discrepancies between aims and actual achievements and possibly to explain why certain aims were more successfully pursued than others, what barriers arose in the process of implementing reforms and what strategies emerged in the process of implementation in order to realize reform concepts or to prevent them from being realized.

For this purpose, the coordinator of the project, an expert of higher education research, analysed existing concepts of implementation and major research undertaken on implementation processes in various social sectors, and incorporated the available concepts and methods selectively into a common set of implementation issues to be examined in country studies. He invited other experts from various countries to analyse select major structural reforms in higher education (for example changes of admission policies, the re-structuring of institutional types and the establishment of single new institutions of higher education) and to analyse the reform concepts, the implementations process and the actual achievements. He succeeded in many cases to raise funds from national agencies of the respective countries to cover the costs of the project. In addition, the coordinator participated in some of the country studies, notably in interviewing key persons of the implementation process, in order to enrich the interpretation of the individual cases by the views and experiences of an external observer. Finally, he invited a well-known specialist of implementation research to join the comparative analysis of the case studies (Cerych and Sabatier 1986).

Some of the individual case studies did not follow the common guidelines closely. The authors of the synthesis report, however, could make up for this limitation, among other things, by interviewing the authors of the country reports and by collecting other information themselves. The final report obviously benefitted from using implementation concepts as a frame of reference without basing the study on a single one of them.

Evaluation of study abroad

Support schemes for institutions of higher education cooperating with each other in arranging temporary study provisions for their students at partner institutions spread in Europe during the 1970s. These activities are based on the belief that temporary study in another country would be more and more valuable for students, but was unlikely to expand if not any systematic institutional measures were taken. The U.S. model of the "junior year abroad" inspired the debate in Europe, though different measures were actually realized.

The two coordinators of the project, a European researcher experienced in policy oriented collaborative research projects and an American director of an international office of a university who was also involved in institutional research and professionally active in shaping national policies of improving international activities in higher education, sensed a growing interest in the evaluation of organized measures to facilitate student mobility and succeeded to raise funds from supra-national agencies and national governments for such a project.

The project (see Burn, Cerych and Smith 1990; Oppen, Teichler and Carlson 1990) aimed to analyse the extent to which supra-national, national or institutional programmes of promoting study mobility actually reached their goals. Therefore, the research project had to identify the aims and the measures taken within different support programmes and in different countries, to analyse the actual processes of administrative and academic support and the processes of studying abroad, to measure the perceived impacts and to examine the extent to which those impacts varied according to the measures taken and possibly other factors, for example, academic cultures in the respective home and host country. Thus, the design largely had to mirror the aims, measures and impacts prevailing in the field to be analysed. The coordinators of the project began the project on the assumption that this aim would be achieved in the best possible way if the research team comprised higher education researchers as well as practitioners in the organization of student exchange and if in-depth knowledge of higher education of all the countries to be analysed was represented.

In fact, the project certainly succeeded well, in tune with the strategic options taken from the outset, in identifying the diversity of rationales underlying student exchange and the expected impacts of various measures of facilitating student exchange through administrative and academic measures. The communication between practitioners and researchers proved to be heuristically valuable to elicit "theories" prevailing in the field on the relationships between individual competences, organized measures, academic and administrative conditions, actual experiences and finally impacts of study abroad which the key actors in the field were not aware of and the researchers would not have thought of if this cooperation had not been established. It became obvious that a project of this kind has to be both comparative and trans-national: prevailing rationales of the best ways of arranging study abroad and the most desirable impact of the study abroad are strongly imbedded in the educational and administrative philosophies prevailing in the respective countries addressed in the research project.

The project design was more complex than any previous quantitative analysis in terms of the variety of cases involved, the combination of experiences expressed by administrators, educators and students, the range of themes addressed and the variables taken into consideration. The strengths of the project, however, were closely linked to its weaknesses. The project pragmatically mirrored the conceptual basis of the actors in the field without transcending this basis theoretically, and it selected the most suitable measures of impacts of study abroad employed in previous research rather than originally contributing to the improvement of those measures.

The ERASMUS evaluation research project

The European Commission sponsored a seven-year evaluation research project in order to gather information about the experience students supported in the framework of the ERASMUS programme acquired prior, during and after a temporary period of study in another European country as well as the views of those in charge of the programmes at the participating institutions, departments and networks. This was by far the largest evaluation research project commissioned by the European Commission on any of its education programmes.

The study was undertaken by researchers of single institution from a single country (see Maiworm, Steube and Teichler 1991; Teichler and Maiworm 1996; Teichler 1996) and did not aim to develop any new concepts and methods. Rather, it reiterated and improved the approaches already tested in the above named study abroad evaluation project. This ensured a certain quality of the surveys and a comparability of data. The ERASMUS project, however, was more complex than the predecessor project in terms of com-

bing about 20 different studies, thus allowing to compare the experiences of students from different cohorts and students mobile under different conditions (Inter-University Co-operation Programmes and European Community Course Credit Transfer System), the views held by students and by those in charge of the programme, students' and former students' views up to five years after the study period abroad. In addition, the researchers put an emphasis on conceptual clarification of select issues of student mobility, notably problems involved in the recognition of study in another country (Teichler 1990).

The study provided rich factual information which played a significant role in stimulating debates about further improvement of the ERASMUS programme during the first few years. It contributed to concepts of mobility and international co-operation in select thematic areas. Last not least, the project was more efficient than other projects discussed here in various respects. However, the programme of follow-up surveys eventually was supported on a smaller scale than initially intended. The subsequent surveys did not elicit anymore such a wealth of new fascinating and surprising results as the initial ones but rather provided information on moderate changes in the programme over time. Therefore, the studies lost some attraction for the sponsors and were eventually reduced in scale, thus not allowing for a consistent set of time-series, follow-ups, etc.

The academic profession

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching contributes to the public debate on higher education policy issues in the United States through policy-oriented summaries of the state of knowledge and through surveys in select areas. Notably, some surveys on the academic profession were undertaken. Scholars were asked to report their experiences and express their views regarding work tasks and employment conditions, job satisfaction and problems incurred as well as views on the functions of higher education in general and the links between higher education and society.

The Carnegie Foundation invited scholars from altogether 15 countries to participate in a comparative survey on the academic profession. The cooperation was based on the assumption that certain problems are basically common to the academic profession in most countries, for example the balancing of the teaching and research function, the tensions between academic freedom on the one hand and institutional coordination and accountability on the other, and the professional paradox of a growing societal importance of systematic knowledge alongside a declining status and reputation of the profession in charge of knowledge generation and transmission. However, the existing variations in coping with these problems was deemed worth to be analysed and documented in detail.

The basic consensus regarding the relevance of certain issues, thus formed the conceptual basis for the comparative study. In the process of setting thematic priorities and formulating the questionnaire it became obvious that priorities tended to differ both according to the various conditions in the countries participating and according to the concepts favoured by the participating researchers. A compromise was reached between a centralist approach (i.e. the initiator and coordinator of the comparative project setting a strict frame for the individual country studies) and a team approach (i.e. the representatives of the various countries developing jointly a concept thereby aiming to strike a balance between the various conditions in the countries under consideration and the views represented in the team). The themes of the questionnaire originally employed in the U.S. were jointly supplemented and rephrased to be suitable for diverse higher education systems. In addition, some of the researchers from the individual countries modified, deleted and supplemented questions up to about one quarter of the length of the questionnaire.

In the analysis and interpretation of the findings again a compromise between a central, a team, and a decentral project structure was reached. The initiators and coordinators first published a report in which they interpreted the findings from their individual point of view (Boyer, Altbach and Whitelaw 1994). In addition, those in charge of the individual country studies were invited to write summaries of their country studies in a certain format for a joint publication. Finally, the scholars in charge of the individual country studies were completely free in shaping their country studies and making use of the comparative data (see for example Enders and Teichler 1995; Arimoto and Ehara 1996).

The project provided a data set useful for comparative analysis but the conceptual cooperation within the project was not sufficiently close to allow for a coherent presentation and interpretation of the findings shared by most of the researchers involved.

Relationships between education and employment in Japan in comparative perspective

The Volkswagen Foundation, the largest private foundation in Germany for the promotion of research, tends to identify itself thematic areas in which the foundation is willing to support research. Apart from major areas made known publicly the Foundation supports consortia of research teams for certain research areas in which co-operation among a few research teams might lead to more promising results.

Japan is generally regarded as diametrically contrasting German education, training and work philosophies in various respects. While the German tradition emphasizes specialized pre-career training and professional identity, the

Japanese pre-career education, more strongly expanded in terms of number of students completing full-time upper secondary education, in contrast tends to be fairly general. Also, initial training as well as training at subsequent career stages in Japan aim to avoid the notion of creating a specialist, whereby company loyalty is more significant for the identity of the employees than attachment to a certain profession. The Volkswagen Foundation suggested to analyse, whether the training as well as the professional concepts and the realities were really as contrasting as generally assumed, what the impacts of these contrasting approaches were, and whether these contrasts were stable or tended to change. The Foundation initially commissioned a study on the state of available knowledge (Schaeper and Schnitzer 1989) and organized an exploratory conference. Subsequently, it invited some researchers to form a consortium and apply for research funds. Those researchers invited to apply were abreast with major theories and methods of research in the respective areas, had substantial field knowledge on the German scene as a background for implicit comparison, and had already conducted research on Japan in the past.

Thus, the funding agency formulated a research agenda of significant theoretical and practical relevance. It provided substantial support for in-depth study and left it up to the researchers supported to choose the most suitable research design.

The researchers participating in the research consortium accepted the basic approach, first, in not giving any a priori preference to certain theories and conceptual frameworks, but rather to employ a variety of them as long as they seemed to be promising for the explanation of the contrasting education and employment approaches in Japan and Germany and their underlying rationales. Second, after careful analysis of available research, not least with the help of Japanese researchers (c.f. Teicher et al. 1996), they decided to conduct only empirical research that was genuinely based on a German–Japanese comparison and possibly could not be undertaken by anybody else than German observers of the Japanese scene. Prime emphasis was put on interviewing senior persons at personnel offices, administrators in educational institutions, key persons in education and employment policies, etc. A strategic interview technique was employed to provoke respondents to explain their rationales in the light of typical questions or possible alternative strategies their German colleagues would have in mind (see first results in Demes and Georg 1994).

A summary of research experiences

All of the five comparative projects briefly outlined above required substantial empirical work. Therefore it was not feasible, as we often note in comparative studies on higher education, to ask experts to write country essays primarily

on the basis of already available knowledge or to collect it with the help of minimal financial support. Thus, considerable resources for research were required.

All five projects were awarded substantial funds because of the high relevance of the issues addressed and the expectation that the results would stimulate interesting debates in the respective area. The majority of funding was provided by institutions involved in higher education policy and administration rather than primarily in research promotion.

Most of the projects drew from a broad range of available theories, methods and instruments. They were selectively employed as far as they turned out to suit the issues to be addressed. Two projects differed considerably from the others in terms of the sophistication of the concepts and the methods employed. In all cases, however, the projects obviously gained substantially from the diverse expertise of the researchers involved in the research team and all projects, in fact, sparked stimulating debates.

The four projects not undertaken by a single research team of a single institution experienced serious delays. Regardless whether the researchers cooperating at different localities were involved on a part-time or a full-time basis, not a single one of the collaborative projects was completed earlier than after twice the time-span originally envisaged. Therefore, major findings of the collaborative projects were initially published in summarizing essays or interim reports.

The modes of collaboration varied substantially between these four projects. The publications of three of the projects suggest that the concepts of the participating researchers were too diverse to be embedded into a highly integrated conceptual framework. In some cases, diverse methodological options reduced the comparability of results. In two cases, the division of labour among the collaborating researchers was reorganized in the process of analysis and interpretation of the information collected.

The results do not allow to draw any general conclusion about an optimal configuration of collaboration of international research teams jointly involved in a comparative project. The more centralized a collaborative project is arranged, the more it succeeds in ensuring a coherent data collection, a consistent interpretation and an overall efficiency of the process. In contrast, decentralized projects often elicit results which are more complex and conceptually richer than a centralized project is likely to achieve. Experiences indicate that internationally collaborative projects are on the one hand most valuable in providing information and stimulation for broadening the scope, but on the other are very vulnerable as far as working on schedule, joint methodology and consensus in the interpretation of findings are concerned.

Implications for further research

Research on higher education is an object-focussed area based on a broad range of disciplines. The institutional base is often shaky and obviously also very diverse. Various characteristics of this field, notably the blurred distinction between the scholar and the reflective practitioner, contribute to enormous tension. Although research on higher education enjoys substantial public attention, it faces considerable problems in establishing a common basis, as far as exchange of information or basic agreement on major paradigms and basic knowledge to guarantee minimum standards of conceptual and methodological quality are concerned.

Interest in comparative studies grew substantially in recent years. Higher education is among those social spheres in which learning from experiences acquired in other countries is most productive, universal elements are regarded as crucial and growing international cooperation contributes to significant changes. As comparative research can be conceptually and methodologically very demanding and fruitful, the growing interest in comparative research could be seen as a promising stimulus for enhancing a common identity and a growing quality of research in this area.

Comparative research on higher education seldom is grounded on a specific theoretical basis. Few comparative research designs represent the ideal type of setting a detailed research agenda of clearly defined hypotheses to be tested. Rather, the majority of comparative research projects are exploratory, most productive in providing unexpected insight and they often call for new concepts.

Neatly established concepts guiding the whole research project from the outset are unlikely to be successful in comparative research. Quasi-experimental research designs turn out to be too simplistic. Due to the complexity of the different national settings, comparative research is bound to take into account a wealth of variables which cannot be as strictly controlled as a perfect research designs calls for.

In addition, comparative research faces many problems of a practical nature. Costly and time-consuming comparative research seems to be granted sufficient funds most likely if it addresses issues of current political concern. Language barriers and limits of field knowledge often lead to a poorer provision of information than in projects focussing on a single country. International collaborative research teams might help redress these problems but they often aggravate problems as well: a heterogeneity of schools of thoughts, spiralling costs, different work styles and many other constraints have to be reckoned with. International research teams tend to be vulnerable.

However, these problems do not call into question the importance of comparative studies on higher education. Information on other higher education

systems is most fruitful in destroying conceptual thinking and reasoning based on narrow experience; comparative research is a gold mine for the early stages of conceptual restructuring. And comparisons are indispensable for understanding a reality shaped by common international trends, reforms frequently based on comparative observation, as well as growing trans-national activities and partial supra-national integration in higher education.

Comparative research projects seem to be theoretically and methodologically most promising if they are based on a semi-structured research design. Certainly, a specific issue both of theoretical and practical relevance has to be clarified at the beginning to such an extent that certain basic questions will not be lost in the research process. Otherwise the researchers are likely to become lost in an abundance of unstructured descriptive information. But it is helpful for substantially and procedurally complex comparative research projects not to opt for a fixed theoretical frame but rather to examine the strengths of various conceptual approaches in explaining the phenomena analysed. Also, research designs are needed which do not only test originally harboured assumptions but systematically deal with the fact that comparative projects are likely to generate surprising information which eventually calls for a re-structuring of the initial conceptual framework.

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