

The Daily Life of Comparative Higher Education Research: Experiences from Six Surveys on the Academic Profession and University Graduates

**Contribution to the ESF-EuroHESC Workshop:
Challenges in Comparative Higher Education
Research – Comparing Higher Education Systems,
Organizations and Individual Academic Behaviour**

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Ulrich Teichler

International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel (INCHER)
University of Kassel, Kassel, Germany
Email: teichler@incher.uni-kassel.de

Choice for Analysis: Six Collaborative Questionnaire Survey Projects in Two Thematic Areas

Comparative graduate surveys:

- § CHEERS: Career after Higher Education
- § REFLEX: The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society
- § EMBAC: Employability and Mobility of Bachelor Graduates in Europe

Comparative surveys of the academic profession

- § CARNEGIE: The International Academic Profession
- § CAP: The Changing Academic Profession
- § EUROAC: The Academic Profession in Europe

Major Available Publications

Schomburg, Harald and Teichler, Ulrich (eds.). *Higher Education and Graduate Employment in Europe*. Dordrecht: Springer 2006.

Teichler, Ulrich (ed.). *Careers of University Graduates*. Dordrecht: Springer 2007.

Allen, Jim and van der Velden, Rolf (eds.). *The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society*. Dordrecht: Springer 2011.

Schomburg, Harald and Teichler, Ulrich (eds.). *Employability and Mobility of Bachelor Graduates in Europe*. Rotterdam and Taipei: Sense 2011.

Altbach, Philip G. (ed.). *The International Academic Profession*. Princeton, NJ: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching 1996.

Locke, William, Cummings, William K., and Fisher, Don (eds.): *Changing Governance and Management on Higher Education: The Perspective of the Academy*. Dordrecht: Springer 2011.

(No publications yet of the EUROAC project)

Countries and Regions

- § CHEERS: 12 (11 Europe; Japan)
- § REFLEX: 15 Europe (+Japan not included in comparative report)
- § EMBAC: 10 Europe
- § CARNEGIE: 14 (13 countries and one region) worldwide (Groups: Australia, 3 Asia, 3 Latin America, US, 5 Europe, Israel) (+Egypt not included in the comparative report)
- § CAP: 19 (18 countries and one region, i.e. Hong Kong) world wide (Groups: 13 mature countries, among them 7 in Europe, and 6 emerging countries)
- § EUROAC: The Academic Profession in Europe: 12 Europe: 5 newly surveyed in EUROAC and data from 7 CAP countries (+Romania not included in comparative report)

Funding of Projects

- § CHEERS: Central funding (EU Targeted Socio-Economic Research) for 9 countries, national governments or research promotion agencies for 3 countries
- § REFLEX: Central funding (EU 6th Research Framework Programme) for majority of countries, national governments or research promotion agencies for minority of countries
- § EMBAC: Central funding for the whole project (honoraria and conference) by German Federal Ministry of Education and Research
- § CARNEGIE: Central funding by Carnegie Foundation for central functions, the US study and a minority of country studies, national governments or research promotion agencies for majority of countries
- § CAP: no central funding, national governments or research promotion agencies for all countries, small national contributions to central data collection
- § EUROAC: Combined central and national funding by ESF and national research funding agencies (reduction of originally envisaged countries due to lack of support by national agencies)
- § Strong impact of funding on coordination and duration of projects

National, Regional or International Starting Points

- § *National survey*: Carnegie Foundation wanted to undertake an international survey as a sequel to a previous national survey.
- § *European survey*: CHEERS and REFLEX wanted to develop a complex model questionnaire for regular surveys in Europe.
- § *European secondary analysis*: EMBAC wanted to trace comparable results from different national surveys.
- § *International survey*: CAP wanted to develop a questionnaire that covers the reality in economically advanced and middle-income countries worldwide.
- § *Others*: EUROAC concentrated on European countries, but drew from a questionnaire of an international survey.

Joint Instrument of Data Gathering vs. Country-specific Questionnaire

- § All 5 survey projects developed a common questionnaire, but allowed countries to add additional questions and to subtract some questions.
- § Country additions and subtractions ranged from 0%-20%.
- § Country additions were not included in international data sets.
- § In some comparative questions, national categories (NATCAT) are needed: e.g. types of study programmes and degrees, types of HE institutions, types of staff categories, currencies, etc.

Modes of Coordination and Collaboration

- § *Completely central project*: Central concept development, coordination and information gathering: None of the 6 projects (but for example various ERASMUS evaluation studies)
- § *Only de-central data collection*: Central concept development, coordination and interpretation, decentral information gathering: None
- § *Coordinated country report project*: Central concept development and coordination, decentral information gathering and interpretation: EMBAC
- § *Centrally guided decentral project*: Mixed central-decentral concept development, central coordination, decentral information gathering, mixed central-decentral interpretation (strongly guided): CARNEGIE
- § *Centrally coordinated decentral project*: Joint concept development, decentral information gathering and analysis, strong central coordination: CHEERS, REFLEX, EUROAC
- § *Loosely coordinated de-central project*: Joint concept development, decentral information gathering and analysis, soft central/semi-central coordination: CAP

Duration of the Project

From substantive/methodological preparation to final major comparative report

- § CHEERS: (1995) 1997-2007: 10 years
- § REFLEX: 2004-2011: 7 years
- § EMBAC: 2010-2011: 1 year
- § CARNEGIE: 1990-1996: 6 years
- § CAP: 2004-2013 (?): 9 years
- § EUROAC: 2008-2013 (?): 5 years

Reasons for the Long Duration of Most Projects

- § Unequal funds and personnel resources
- § Lack of coordinated timing in the process of surveying and subsequent data handling
- § Communication within an international project
- § Soft coordination
- § Hiccups in the editing and publishing processes

Country Comparisons

Assumption that a single country is the entity of a society and of a “higher education system”.

Questions marks:

- § Multi-lingual countries (Canada, Switzerland): Treated as a single country in CAP, EUROAC
- § Countries with clearly distinct politically regions (Hong Kong and Mainland China): treated like two distinct countries in CARNEGIE, CAP
- § Countries with moderately distinct political regions (UK, Germany shortly after unification): only inclusion of the major region (CARNEGIE)

Stronger emphasis on country variety than on disciplinary variety: In fact, enormous variety by country

Sectors within Higher Education

- § CHEERS, REFLEX and EMBAC: In parts of the text: distinction between universities and other types of higher education institutions, if applicable in the respective country
- § CARNEGIE: No distinction made in the overall report; distinctions made in various publications in Europe: Universities vs. other institutions of higher education
- § CAP: Distinction in the international data set between “universities” (institutions both in charge of teaching and research) and “other institutions of higher education” (primarily in charge of teaching) irrespective of national terminology; however, this distinction is ignored in many publications
- § EUROAC: Distinction in data set and most reports between universities and other types of higher education institutions
- § Exception in CAP: In some Latin American countries: Distinction (research/teaching vs. teaching) of according to functions of individual academics rather than according to institutional type

Categories of Graduates

- § CHEERS: In most parts of major reports, no distinction is made according to type of degree. In some cases: bachelor/short-cycle/non-university degree vs. master/long programme degree
- § REFLEX: as in CHEERS
- § EMBAC: Distinction between Bachelor degree (and equivalence), Master degree and single-cycle degree

Distinction between Categories of Academic Staff

- § Professors/senior academics: Professors and associate professors in U.S. terms (national equivalences)
- § Junior academic staff: Assistant professors and lecturers in U.S. terms (national equivalences)
- § Equivalent distinction not easy to draw in all countries (e.g. UK)

Language Issues

- § In all five questionnaire survey projects:
Master questionnaire in English
- § In four projects: Responsibility of individual
country teams to translate questionnaire into
home country language
- § CARNEGIE: Back-translation of draft
national questionnaires into English;
negotiations about possible misunder-
standings/errors and improvements

Formulating the Concept and the Questionnaire: Size and Heterogeneity of the Team

Overall size of the international team: 20-60 scholars

Diversity of the overall team:

- Country background
- Discipline
- School of thought
- Personal likings
- Values and links to theory and practice
- Methodological expertise
- Team experience and team competence
- Operational/managerial attitudes

Formulating the Concept and the Questionnaire: The Decision-making Process

Relatively similar processes in the various projects:

- § In most cases: 2-3 workshops for the elaboration of the conceptual framework (possibly including formulation of the application for funds) and the formulation of the questionnaire
- § Partly very controversial communication
- § Intensive exchange of thoughts between meetings before final formulation of questionnaire
- § Subcommittees for theory and methods (CAP), sub-teams with thematic neighbourhood (EUROAC)
- § Strong coordinative intervention at the final stage of questionnaire formulation

The Length of the Questionnaire

Similar experiences in all projects:

- § First stage of discourse: avoid too long questionnaire, claims that 20-30 minutes would be the absolute maximum (in some countries)
- § Second stage of discourse: Proposal of so many themes two hours could be considered as necessary
- § Third stage of discourse: Compromise to accept a questionnaire length which requires about one hour to respond

Umbrella Theme

In most projects: a search for an umbrella theme which ensures a specific flavour of the project without serving a strict guideline for the selection of themes

- § CHEERS: Graduate job opportunities in the wake of higher education expansion
- § REFLEX: Changing competences and work tasks
- § EMBAC: Acceptance of the new university bachelor of the Bologna Process (strong umbrella theme!)
- § CARNEGIE: The academic profession under pressure in the wake of HE expansion
- § CAP: Drivers for the change of the academic profession: relevance, internationalisation, managerialism
- § EUROAC: European convergence?

Consensus and Varying Views as Regards Thematic Areas of Graduate Surveys

Consensus

- § Links socio-biographic variables, prior education, study and career
- § Retrospective view of study conditions and provisions
- § Study conditions/provisions and study behaviour as possible factors
- § Grades and competences as intervenient variables
- § Transition, employment, work and job satisfaction

Example of major controversy (REFLEX): Competence upon graduation or a few years after graduation (i.e. at the time of the survey)?

Consensus and Varying Views as Regards Thematic Areas of Academic Profession Surveys

Consensus



Views, activities, results



Perception of context, working conditions and expectations



Key aspects of major functions (teaching, research)

Examples of controversies:



Relevance of questions on “third function”



Analysing or not analysing the diversity of higher education



The validity of retrospective questions

The Survey Process

Decentralized surveying, i.e. by individual country teams

Strong emphasis on common objectives, but soft “enforcement”:

- § Representative survey: strong emphasis, decentralized responsibility
- § Timing of survey: Emphasis on concurrent surveying, but acceptance of late-comers
- § Individual countries are free as modes of contacting, modes of responding (e.g. paper questionnaires and/or online survey, additional interviews), and number and modes of reminders are concerned
- § (Re-)coding of open questions: recommendations, but unequal treatment

Occasional hard enforcement:

- § Exclusion of one country each from the final data set in CARNEGIE and EUROAC

Usable Responses and Return Rates

Comparative graduate surveys:

- § CHEERS: More than 40,000 responses, i.e. on average about 3.300 per country; average response rate 39% (varying between 50% and 15%)
- § REFLEX: About 36,000, i.e. on average about 2.400 per country; average response rate 29% (varying between 47% and 18%)
- § EMBAC: No information (secondary study)

Comparative surveys of the academic profession

- § CARNEGIE: More than 19,000, i.e. on average about 1,300 per country; average response rate 43% (varying between 28% and 97%, the latter interviews)
- § CAP: About 25,000, i.e. on average 1,300 per country; average response rate 26% (varying between 86% and 4%)
- § EUROAC: Report not yet available

Data Handling and Administration I

Similar processes in the five questionnaire surveys:

- § A single team responsible centrally for central data set
- § Coding scheme delivered by central data team
- § Data entry, first data check, (re-)coding and “audit reports” de-centrally
- § Additional data check and creation of a comparative data set by central data team
- § Provision of the comparative data set to all national teams

Specific processes:

- § Data weighing for enhancing representativeness, if national team can deliver similar population data (e.g. CAP)
- § Methods team in charge of decisions felt necessary in the process (CAP)

Data Handling and Administration II

Period from final decision about the questionnaire to



the creation of the final data set:



Varying between about one year (EUROAC) and more than four years (CAP)



Reason for long period: unequal involvement in data set improvement and subsequent emergence of grave errors



Consequences of long period: forgetting the rules; personnel changes among responsible persons for data; publications based on different data sets

Data Ownership and Data Use

Similar modes in all five questionnaire survey projects:

- § Data ownership: the national teams
- § National teams get common data set for (a) analyzing their country in comparative perspective, (b) participating in joint analyses
- § National teams should not write publications about individual other countries without consultation of the respective national team
- § As long as the joint comparative reports are not published, the national teams should respect in their publication policy the right of the team to publish the general comparative reports in the English language first
- § Subsequently, the national teams are free as regards data use and publications

Different procedures vary:

- § whether the data set is made public after some period for data analysis by other scholars or not.

Varying Modes of Comparative Analysis

The following modes of comparative analysis might apply both for analyses of the whole questionnaire or for analyses of select themes:

- § Country team analyses own country data without any comparison
- § Country team analyses own country data comparatively
- § Country team analyses own country data comparatively and asks other teams for help (e.g. explaining the context)
- § Coordinators undertake syntheses of country reports
- § Individual authors or country teams undertake comparative analyses
- § Authors from different countries undertake comparative analyses jointly

Publication Activities

- § In some cases, publications of the state of knowledge prior to the project (CHEERS, EUROAC)
- § One or two overall volumes of the respective projects
- § Thematic volumes frequently stimulated through international workshops aimed at disseminating the research results (notably in CAP)
- § Frequent national reports in comparative perspective (notably CHEERS, CAP)
- § Occasional dissertation of team members (3 in CHEERS)
- § Large numbers of publications in some projects: More than 300 (?) on CHEERS data, already more than 150 on CAP data up to 2011.

Strength: Enormous attention paid to comparative analyses.

Weakness: Lack of consistency of the publications.

Lessons for Improvement of Future Comparative Studies

- § Persistence of the same strengths and weaknesses
- § Persistence of high hopes and mixed achievements
- § Or chances for improvements – to be discussed!

In Sum: Experiences from Comparative Studies in Higher Education

- § The start is optimistic
- § The process is slow and nerve-wrecking
- § The magnitude of results and their visibility are enormous
- § The quality and relevance of the results is extremely diverse
- § We are sad about some missed opportunities and we have a mixed feeling about the strengths and weaknesses of comparative research
- § At the end, we have many new friends and a few new enemies
- § We would do it again!