On Comparative Research in Higher Education

Jussi Välimaa

1. Introduction

Comparative studies and comparative research settings have contributed significantly to the theoretical development of higher education research. Burton Clark developed his influential theoretical device after having studied other than US higher education (Clark 1983). 'Clark's triangle' is, however, only one of the intellectual devices developed in comparative research. Equally interesting is the concept 'fields of social action' as introduced by Bleiklie, Hostaker and Vabo (2000), which was developed, again, in a comparative research setting. Comparative studies have also challenged us to define different categories of higher education traditions and systems, thus providing useful intellectual devices for locating one's national higher education system into a larger context (Gellert 1993, Teichler 1988). Historical comparative studies have, in turn, increased our understanding of various traditions and origins of Western universities (e.g. Rashdall 1895, Cobban 1988).

Comparative studies have been especially popular as a research strategy in European Higher education studies. According to Ulrich Teichler (1996), one of the reasons for this is that the number of higher education researchers is quite small in most individual European states. This has created a need for a broader basis of thought. In addition, new political (and academic) interests in monitoring European developments in a comparative research setting have emerged, because of the pressures to harmonize and standardize the European higher education area through the Bologna process over the last years.

The benefits of comparative research are evident. As Rothblatt and Wittrock (1993, 7) nicely put it, "comparison brings out contrasts as well as similarities, but it brings them out in relation to a problem, an event, a development, a change in direction, a stopping point for reflection." It is for these reasons that comparative research, even though Rothblatt and Wittrock speak here about historical comparisons, "leads us toward new questions, new puzzles, new sequences, and perhaps new data."

However, a perspective which seems to be missing from the current discussion is the question how to take into account social dynamics of different national systems of higher education? I will discuss this topic after I have first shortly described and analyzed the traditions and types of comparative studies in education in higher education. By social dynamics I mean the interest of knowledge which focuses on the functioning of higher education by asking: What is going on? How does it work in reality? I will also discuss the importance of field knowledge in understanding the social dynamics of different higher education systems.

This article is based on literature review and on personal experiences gained during participating in a number of comparative studies mainly in Europe (see Välimaa 1996, 2001, 2004, 2004b, Välimaa & Mollis 2004, Välimaa and Westerheijden 1995). The tone and the focus of my article is therefore mostly European.

I is a great pleasure to have the opportunity to publish these thoughts in the Festschrift of Mary Henkel, because her studies on academic identities and cultures (see e.g. Henkel 2000) have provided interesting intellectual starting points also for comparative thinking in higher education. Understanding the contexts of academic world is important, when one attempts to understand both the differences and the similarities across countries, higher education institutions and academic disciplines.

2. On Comparative Research in Higher Education

Comparative research has a long history in humanities as a method of inquiry. According to Rothblatt and Wittrock (1993, 7) *The Comparative Method* as it was once called, was launched especially by philologists, proto-anthropologists, and legal scholars, who "were certain that they had discovered (as 'laws' of Nature are discovered) a *Method*, a unique intellectual tool laying bare the evolution of language and society". Now these glorious days have passed, but it does not mean that the basic question "What is comparative research?" would have become any less important.

In trying to answer this question in higher education research it is helpful to lean on the field of comparative education.[1] According to the first editor of the *Comparative Education Review*, George Bereday, there are two main approaches to comparative studies (which are continuously relevant): *area studies* and *thematic studies*. As for area studies, "in its fully developed form, the comparison of the total socio-educational systems has been mastered by only a few" even though "the classification by itself does not make them comparative." This is because a comparative study "involves comparison –a direct comparison of at least two countries." This is a crucial remark, because it gives a particular definition of a comparative education study, which seems to be widely accepted. "After all, this seems to be the only consensus reached at the International Conference of Comparative Educators in Hamburg in 1954", as Bereday (1957, 13-15) notes. Thematic approach (or problem approach) "has the merit of limiting the range in which the researcher must work without rendering his work less comparative. … Problem approach is more modest than total approach; it is nonetheless comparative."

Bereday also discussed the challenges of comparative education in a manner which has been followed by other comparative educationalists. He selects an example taken from a more established academic discipline, in this case political science. Referring to an article published in the *American Political Science Review* (no.3, 1953) Bereday notes that there can be found the following comparative approaches can be defined: 1) the

[1] According to Friedrich Schneider (1931), the editor of the first journal dedicated to comparative education, *Zeitschrift fur Erziehungswissenschaft*, emphasized that there are three kinds of studies in the area of comparative education: foreign education, comparative education, and international education (in Rust et al. 1999, 94).

construction of a total conceptual scheme which will furnish a central principle, 2) problem approach or a comparative examination of only one issue or variable, 3) check list of high points of interests … which becomes a basis of classification of comparative materials, 4) Area study that is a comparative examination limited to homogenous geographical, historical, economic or cultural unit. The basic tone of the political scientists is as follows: "no method is comparative unless it is preceded by a formulation of an abstract scheme which serves as a guiding hypothesis for the collection and presentation of comparative data. A pure enunciation of facts about foreign countries is in the light of this analysis not a comparative treatment." Bereday supported this argumentation which is quite natural in light of his treatise *Comparative Method in Education* (Bereday 1964).[2]

This reference is interesting, not only because of its method of borrowing from other academic disciplines, but because it also illustrates one of the permanent tensions in comparative research. This has become visible also in the field of higher education studies. On the one hand, comparative studies are expected to have theoretical ambitions to find causal relationships instead of being 'just' descriptions of different cases (whether they be institutions or countries). On the other hand, comparative studies are expected to be historically well-rooted and analytical descriptions of the socio-educational systems, or analyses of thematic areas.[3] This academic tension is supported by the fact that it has been quite difficult to define what comparative research is. Altbach (1985, 2194) is evidently right, when he says that "there is no widely accepted discipline of comparative higher education with a specific methodology. Indeed, the term "comparative" is often misused in that it is applied to the study of educational phenomena in at least one country by a national of a different country." This passage shows yet another dimension of comparative research. It is often normative. Comparative research is normative not only in a sense that an authority defines what is "a good" comparative research. It is normative, because the idea of comparison easily turns into the idea of competition, when the research outcomes are interpreted to the common public –or the policy makers. As, for example, the PISA studies show, the list of countries in a numerical order is easily understood as an international ranking list.[4] The same applies to all comparative studies, which use numerical information as criteria for comparisons. Comparison is inherent in comparative research in a way, which easily manifests itself as a ranking list, even though this might not be researchers' intention.

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[2] According to Holmes (1984, 587) Bereday followed induction as a method of scientific research. It implies that "the researchers should first observe, collect, and classify objective facts, before inducing tentative causal hypotheses" aiming to create a universal, unconditionally valid law.

[3] Another classification focusing on the same basic categories of comparative education is provided by Rossello (1960), who makes the distinction between *descriptive* comparative education (collection of documents, observation, and comparison of facts in order to describe differences and similarities) and *explanatory* comparative education (investigation of the causes of the comparative phenomena and, if possible, prediction as to their future development) ,which is able to give causal explanations to educational phenomena. According to Rossello, these causal explanations are academically more demanding and also more useful, because they can be used by decision-makers.

[4] Shanghai Jiao Tong University's ranking list of universities may provide another example of the competitive element utilized in a comparative setting, even though the specific aim in this academic effort is to produce a ranking list.

The basic underlying tensions concerning the nature and purposes of comparative higher education research were revealed in the debate between British and Dutch colleagues, who represented different intellectual traditions. Goedegebuure and van Vught (1996) argued that causal explanations are the highest goal for comparative (as well as for other social) research. For them, the best way to reach this goal is to formulate hypotheses, which can be tested with the help of empirical data. Philosophically, this way of thinking is supported by positivist theories of science as represented by Karl Popper. It aims at producing reliable knowledge and theoretical understanding of social phenomena. This is, indeed, a very ambitious and respectable goal, hardly resisted by any scholar. The problem with this kind of approach is, however, that it fails to explain where the hypotheses come from. In theory, hypotheses are based on theories, which have been tested. In practice, however, these theories –like other human conceptualizations- are social constructions (see Tierney 2001). Teichler also criticizes (1996, 450) this research tradition, because the results of studies that test causal relationships are "often regarded as trivial and misleading", leading easily to "a-theoretical accumulations of unexplained facts."

A revealing example of this kind of understanding of a social theory is given by Goedegebuure and van Vught themselves, when they say that : "[A] truly causal comparative study would have to begin with the specification of the hypothesis to be tested (and for this a theory from which the hypothesis can be deduced is indispensable) … The theoretical framework would have to provide indications for such a specification; if no framework is available, a causal analysis cannot be performed." (Goedegebuure & van Vught 1996, 385).

Maurice Kogan (1996) argued, in turn, that there is more than one way of advancing theoretical knowledge on higher education. "It is wrong to assume that without hypothecating there is no theorising". Maurice Kogan was also concerned about the positivistic desire to find causal relationships so deeply rooted in the hypothecating manner of research. According to him, "we will be tying ourselves into an unnecessary bed of nails if we try to direct our research on the basis of pre-structured hypotheses." (Kogan 1996, 398). Instead of testing hypotheses Kogan recommended thematic comparisons, and suggested "the use of comparative case studies of two or more countries, the distinctiveness or similarity of whose policy outcomes is highlighted by the similarities or differences in other respects." (Kogan 1996, 400). The remarkable outcome of this approach speaks well for itself, showing the importance of historically rooted analysis policy change also in producing new theoretical thinking on higher education (see Kogan et al. 2000).

I refer to this debate for two reasons. The first is to remind the reader that all questions about methods and theories are always philosophically rooted in (various) understandings of the nature of knowledge. As, for example, Creswell (1994) has noted, there are a number of philosophical assumptions behind the two main types of paradigms. On the one hand, the interest of knowledge in the *rationalist tradition*, as it is defined by Toulmin (1992), represents the generalizing and universal interests of knowledge. One of

its implications is the aim to produce causal explanations of social phenomena. *The humanistic tradition* in the Western science, in turn, examines human beings in their contexts. The interest of knowledge focuses on particular, local, and timely elements of human behavior. These philosophical assumptions on the nature of knowledge and on the purpose of research are especially important in comparative research, where basic underlying assumptions may have significant impact on the research design –and, thus, the data gathered and the analysis produced.

The second reason is to reveal the fact that there are many starting points for comparative studies in education and in higher education research. For these reasons, the theoretical and conceptual aspects of comparative studies should also be taken seriously, even though this may make the actual study (even) more complicated. The fact remains, namely, that comparative studies are more complicated than other studies in social sciences (see e.g. Bereday 1957, Teichler 1996, Carnoy 2006).

On the political dimension of comparative research

One dimension often mentioned in comparative education studies is the political context of the object of research, whether this concern is the starting point for a study for analysing the export of the Western educational ideas as cultural imperialism, or expressed as a need to take seriously the theories of the state in the analysis (Carnoy 2006), or when analyzing the utilization of different theories by comparative educationalists (Paulston 1977). In higher education research, the political dimension is related to the fact that comparative studies are often funded by, and thus related to the political interests, of international organizations (Teichler 1996). In addition those mentioned by Altbach (1985) (UNESCO, OECD, CARNEGIE) there has emerged new ones. In Europe, the most important of them are the European Union and other European level actors (EUA & labour organizations). This also gives a certain political flavor to the European comparative research projects, because all authors acknowledge the existence of political interests behind comparative studies, even though the research processes are based on independent research. However, knowing the fact that comparative research projects may influence European level policies tends to increase the political consciousness of the researchers.

Political arenas of decision making are, therefore, important intellectual contexts for comparative studies. I put my words in this order, because it is the political dimension of higher education –both internationally and nationally-which makes many comparative studies interesting and important. This is not only related to the connection between international comparisons and their element of competition. Political arenas are important also because they extend their influence inside the academic fields of research, owing to the fact that they tend to support intellectual traditions and research styles, which give causal explanations to social phenomena. This is an understandable, and even a natural interest of knowledge, because there is constant political interest in figuring out which are the best solutions to certain functional or political problems faced in a given higher education systems. This state of matters also means that intellectual traditions (including the theory of causation, positivism and induction as a method of scientific research) and

academic disciplines (like economics), which provide causal explanations, are easily supported by political financers of comparative research in and on higher education. As Peters (2007, 17) has noted, the communication between different theories often takes place in public policy level, where conceptualizations operate like *performative ideologies* with constitutive effects rather than intellectual traditions.

On the practical challenges of comparative research

The practical problems and challenges of comparative research are also connected to the methodological and theoretical problems in comparative research. Teichler (1996, 450) is insightful, when he states that "in a good comparative research the aim is to maximize the chance of getting surprised by completely unexpected findings which might call into questions the prior assumptions." Owing to the (often) political contexts of comparative studies, the practical problems faced by researchers are intertwined with theoretical and methodological aspects of the research design. According to Teichler (1996), the practical problems of comparative studies include the following: 1) language barriers. 2) other barriers to the acquisition of field knowledge, 3) higher costs and efforts, 4) funds provided only if relevant for political issues, and 5) problems in collaboration of international research teams.

Language barriers do not necessarily refer to the difficulties in conducting comparative research projects, but more to the fact that knowledge on countries is heavily dependant on the language of publications. This is especially true in Europe, where small language areas (like Finland and Norway, and others) have been taken into consideration only after extensive publishing in English (Teichler 1996, 452-453). The importance *of field knowledge* has been noted already by the forefathers of comparative research (see Brickman 1977), who noted that a foreign system of education can not be understood on the sole basis of documentary analysis. Field knowledge on higher education is important also because, "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", as Teichler (1996, 453) puts it. Costs and efforts of comparative research are important also because they may influence the research design, leading to more limited studies than what would be favorable. The relevance to current political issues may also have similar kinds of limitations to setting purpose, because "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 purposes that their value for the improvement of the conceptual and methodological basis of higher education research is bound to be weak." (Teichler, 1996, 454). In addition, achieving cooperation among researchers is more difficult to achieve in international projects than in national projects, because of the differences in theories, preferred methods and issues to be analyzed.

Different, types, categories and themes of comparative studies

Even though it is not easy to define what is a comparative research; not to mention The Comparative Method, it has been relatively easy to define what kind comparative research has been conducted in higher education.

Comparative studies have been categorized according to a variety of criteria. In addition to analyzing the uses of different sociological theories, when explaining educational reforms and changes (see Paulston 1977)[5], there have been presented typologies of researchers (Goedegebuure & van Vught 1996)[6] and categories of comparative studies. Kogan (1996) makes a reference to the categories of comparative studies presented by Page (1995). According to him, there are four categories of comparative studies: *single country studies, juxtapositions, thematic comparisons and causal explanations*. Altbach (1985) has, in turn, identified a number of themes that have been considered in comparative higher education. These include: *1) Historical Development of Higher Education and the Transfer of Academic Models*. This refers to a variety of books and articles which have analysed the development of higher education with the help of different higher education models or ideal types of universities. Normally these studies examine how certain international ideal models (like the Humboldtian university) have been implemented and translated in specific national contexts. *2) Curriculum* which refers to the structure and the content of education. According to Altbach (1985), "A comparative study of the curriculum in higher education will also indicate many common elements" because "curriculum is at the very heart of the academic enterprise." *3) Students*. The student unrest of the 1960s, which occurred in many countries, was a major stimulus to comparative higher education, because there emerged a need to understand the causes and consequences of student activism. This theme also highlights how political interest focusing on a certain political phenomena, may support comparative studies on the topic. *4) Expansion*. This refers both to the massification of higher education, to the access to higher education and to the equality of access and the need to learn from other countries experiences. Comparative research setting is often a natural way of analyzing the trends of changes in different national systems of higher education.

In addition to these categorizations, I would like to suggest (yet) another perspective for looking at the comparative research projects, especially at the European politically related comparative studies. In those studies, an essential difference is caused by the research strategy.[7] It is quite clear that the difference in research strategy creates differences in terms of conceptual clarification, amount of work, resources needed, and the analysis of the data (see Teichler 1996, Rust et al. 1999). According to personal experiences gained during participating in a variety of European comparative research projects, there are two basic types of comparative research. The research which belongs to the category *type 1*

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[5] According to Paulston (1977), the main paradigm in explaining social change are the groups of equilibrium theories and conflict theories.

[6] Making a reference to Oyen (1990) Goedegebuure and van Vught (1996) present four ideal types of comparative researchers: *The purists* believe that conducting comparative studies is no different from any other social science research, whereas *the igonorants* pursue research activities across national boundaries without giving a thought to the comparative methods. *The totalists* are well aware of the many problem of comparative studies, but they deliberately ignore them, whereas *the comparativists* acknowledge the points of view represented by purists and totalists, but argue that it is necessary to raise questions about the nature of the comparative studies in order to advance knowledge about cross-national research.

[7] According to Robson (1993), research strategies usually involve four levels: 1) research design, 2) methods of data collection, 3) analysis of the data, and 4) interpretation and implications of the analysis (in Rust et al. 1999).

consists of comparative studies which focus on a certain theme (like the research function of polytechnics, or the Bologna process) and are based on the already existing data. Most typically, these studies consist of individual country reports, written by country specialists, who use the framework designed by the leaders of the research project. Quite often this framework consists of a list of (same) questions to be answered by (different) country specialists. The comparative research, which belongs to the category *type 2* consists of comparative research based on gathering new data -whether it is quantitative or qualitative (or both). Quite often the data is gathered and analyzed by a group of researchers using quantitative means of data gathering, or by a group of country specialists, who gather national data using common international criteria (like a questionnaire) and analyse their own country in relation to other countries or compare all the countries (see Teichler 1996). These studies have the strength of being more coherent than the previous ones. Comparative studies of academic work provide an example of this kind of research design (see Cummings 2008).

Both of these types of research have their strengths and weaknesses. The main challenge with the *type 1* studies is their heterogeneity. Each individual country report aims to repeat the list of contents provided by the leaders of the study. However, when this attempt is successful it easily turns into boring reading, because all the chapters have the same structure no matter what are the internal social dynamics of the country in question. And if individual chapters do not follow a common structure, they may be too different for the purpose of reaching any kind of common comparative perspective. Normally, the main comparative element in these studies is assumed to take place in the reader's head when they read the different country studies. Comparative element is also represented by the introductory or concluding chapters. These summarizing chapters analyze the trends of changes paying attention to common trends and the differences between the countries presented in the volume.

However, from the perspective of the country specialist, the comparative element is clearly carried out by writing on one's own system of higher education for a foreign reader. The change of audience from a national into an international one provides a new perspective not only to the topic at hand, but also to one's national system of higher education. I say it this way, because with the change of language from a national one (like Finnish) into an international one (normally into English) the writer is forced to think about the national system of education from a foreigner's perspective. Furthermore, the questions presented by the leaders of the comparative research project also force one to approach the topic from a new perspective. This is related to the fact that normally the posed questions reflect the social realities of those who ask the questions, but not necessarily those of the national systems of higher education. This discrepancy, or mismatch, is caused by the fact that the social dynamics of every system of higher education tend to differ from the other systems' social dynamics. The question does not only concern the difference of structures, but also the about the relevance of the questions for different national systems of higher education. I will return to this topic in the next chapter.

Type 2 studies face different kinds of challenges. The main problem with these kinds of studies can be detected in the original comparative setting. The clarity of the used concepts in essential. If and when the topic of the research does not really exist in other countries, the study may turn into an effort to analyze one system of higher education with the help of illustrative examples taken from other countries. Let me explain what I mean by this. If we study, for example, academic profession in a comparative setting, we should be quite conscious of what the definition of the academic profession is. Is it the academic profession we see in the United States, with clearly defined and structured academic careers with tenured-tracks and career plans and so forth? Or is it the academic work done by individual academics in (European) national higher education systems, where you can speak about academic profession only after you have reached the position of a permanent professor?

The other example may be taken from a hypothetical international comparative study focusing on community college students. The basic problem with this kind study would be the fact that (American) community colleges do not exist outside the United States. In fact, the question "What kind of community colleges are there in Nordic countries?" was presented to me in a conference in the US a couple of years ago. The problem in answering this kind of question is not the difficulty of explaining that they do not exist in the Nordic Countries. The problem is how to ask questions which are relevant to a comparative research on community colleges. Therefore, instead of asking what kinds of community colleges (or other country-specific educational institutions) exist in other countries, one should ask: what are the educational opportunities for students leaving compulsory education? Or what are the educational opportunities for adults who would like to continue their studies? Answering these questions would reveal the structures of educational systems and the social dynamics of different countries in relation to the needs of students who go to community colleges in the US higher education.

Critical Perspectives to Comparative Research

The whole paradigm of comparative higher education studies has been challenged by Sheila Slaughter (2001). According to her, the present paradigm contains quite many assumptions on the national system of higher education and the benefits of higher education. She suggests that we need to need to analyze higher education as a part of societies instead of closed entities. According to Slaughter (2001, 398), "we need to look at comparative education using theories that draw our attention to phenomenon that mark the break from the modern, industrial era." This remark challenges comparative researchers to reflect on the research strategies. Slaughter recommends mixed methods and a combination of micro and macro and narrative approaches. It is, indeed, useful to remember what many social scientists (like Foucault and Bourdieu) have reminded us about the role of social scientists researching their societies. This is how Slaughter (2001, 405) puts it: "By choosing to study comparative education we become part of the struggle over what higher education will look like, norming, calibrating, celebrating or destabilizing these systems. We are nodes of transnational comparative higher education, simultaneously consulting, contracting, and creating career, or simultaneously critiquing and creating career."

William Tierney (2001) is also critical of the present state of the art of comparative studies. According to Tierney (2001), the modern categories of university and its role as neutral producer of objective knowledge should questioned. Instead of assuming a unified and general pattern of modernization, we should pay attention to *heterogeneity* (in universities and knowledge production), engagement with the other (through hybridity and border-crossing, which are essential in the investigation of new identities of academics), and *method and knowing*. This refers to the fact that "The value assumptions taken for granted in Western culture concerning the nature of education, research and organizational behavior are only a very limited subset of a much larger array of possibilies", as Schwartzman (1985, 102) observed (in Tierney 368). There is a need to expand the array of research methods utilized in comparative studies on higher education.

3. The Problem with Social Dynamics in Comparative Studies

When combining these critical perspectives with the categories of comparative research I suggested that it seems evident that the social dynamics of different national systems of higher education are quite often neglected in comparative higher education research. Based on my experiences, it seems that many comparative studies begin with the assumption that all national higher education systems follow, more or less, the same social dynamics. It is assumed that the classical social forces of market, academic oligarchy and the state –as defined by Clark (1983)- not only exist, but also compete with other in more or less similar social setting. It is all to easy to assume that all national systems of higher education have the same social dynamics, because all national systems of higher education have their Ministries of education, their higher education institutions and academics working in them, with students coming in and out of the higher education institutions. The processes of mass higher education together with the mission overload of universities are also globally identified phenomena (see Peters 2007, Altbach 1998). Furthermore, it is all too easy to assume that the questions and topics, which are relevant in one country, are relevant also in other countries.

The second underlying assumption is that the normal unit of analysis is the nation state (or the higher education institution) as Slaughter (2001) has discussed. It is, however, quite easy to understand why these are seen as normal units of analysis, because the nation states with their national universities have been the manifestations of and essential social forces in the modernization processes of the Western societies. Higher education institutions and national systems of higher education have been strong actors in the modernization processes promoting industrialization, bureaucratization and the state-building processes. In addition, universities have been the key institutions in knowledge production and in strengthening the sense of national and cultural identities (see Wittrock 1993). National systems of higher education also resemble each other. As many scholars have noted, historically, there have been only few ideal models for universities. These are all Western models. They include the influential Humboldtian ideal of university, the British university model and the French university model. A newcomer to these categories is the idealized image of an American research university, which is being

imitated all over the globe. As Altbach has written, the Western –or metropolitan- models of higher education have had a strong influence all over Asia, Africa and Latin America. This is because "Metropolitan academic models are the international standard" (Altbach 1998, 56), and one might add, a standard which every developing higher education system should take seriously. However, the implementation processes of different models are always national processes rooted in national traditions, resources and social dynamics of societies (Altbach 1998). This is one of the reasons why it is crucial to reflect on the social dynamics of all system of higher education.

When these basic underlying assumptions are combined into a comparative setting, we easily end up with comparative settings, which assume that a similar structure of national higher education system produces the same kinds of social dynamics throughout the globe. Let me give an example from Korea, to illustrate what kinds of problems these underlying assumptions may produce. It is a well-known fact that Korean higher education system has borrowed essential elements from the US system of higher education after the Second World War. This means, for example, that Korean private universities have boards of trustees. In the United States, this is normally assumed to represent a market force in higher education. In Korea, however, many boards of trustees are occupied by the relatives of the founder of the higher education institution in question. It means that the social dynamics of the Korean private universities differ significantly from those of the US private universities, because Korean private universities easily turn into reproducing feudal practices favoring certain families and their offspring instead of producing free market forces (see e.g. Buyn 2007). This example aims at illustrating that the social dynamics of national systems of higher education may be quite different, even though they may have the same elements structurally. This example also emphasizes the importance of field knowledge, when conducting comparative studies on and in higher education.

However, being only critical of what previous studies lack is not necessarily the most seminal way of contributing to the development of higher education research. Therefore, I would like to develop some positive argumentation for the purpose of discussing crucial elements of social dynamics of higher education. In addition to traditional sociological intellectual devices, which pay attention to a variety of social forces identified differently in different families of theories[8], one should also pay attention to *spatial and contextual matters,* which have an impact on how national systems of higher education function. Spatial matters refer to the fact that *1) the size of the national higher education system* has an impact on the social dynamics of national higher education systems (small system vs. big systems). The social dynamics of small European nation states, where basically everybody knows everybody, differ from the big systems of higher education, whether small systems have reached the point of a 'mass higher education' or not. In addition, the social dynamics in *small language areas* differ significantly from those of the *big language areas*, because of the simple fact that there are only a limited number of

[8] These intellectual devices include, for example, social class, or social systems and subsystems, or networks, or social fields. In higher education research the most common identified social forces include markets, state (or central authorities), and academic oligarchy (or higher education institutions and basic units).

academic positions –and opportunities for academics- in small language areas. Spatial matters are also important in a globalised world, where *colonial heritage* continues to have an impact on the systems of higher education in previous British, American and French dominions (see Altbach 1998). Historical, cultural and political contexts of national systems of higher education are also important for their functioning. *2) The structure of the state* whether it is a federal state (with both federal and state level ministries of education) or a single nation state creates different socio-political dynamics for higher education. Federal states have more complicated legislative structures and distribution of power compared to single nation states. The collective bargaining power of *3) the academic trade unions and the political power of the student organizations* may also play a role in matters dealing with academic work and profession. In Northern Europe one tends to find unified and strong academic trade unions with weak political agendas, whereas in Southern European countries the contrary is often the case. As for student organizations, Japan provides an example of insignificant student unions, because of their rebellious history in the 1960s, whereas in Latin American universities the contrary is the case. *4) The traditions of universities and higher education* may play a significant role in the social dynamics of national systems of higher education. This is especially true in systems of higher education, where universities have had strong cultural and political *nation building function* like in Finland or Norway (see Välimaa 1996, Bleiklie et al. 2000).

By introducing these pragmatic categories for reflecting on the social dynamics of a national system of higher education I would like to suggest that one should take the spatial and contextual matters seriously, even though they would exist in sociological or political theories. Paying attention to these categories also aims at emphasizing the importance of *field knowledge* (Teichler 1996), because the functioning of a national system of higher education also depends on its geographical and cultural and political contexts. When saying this, I would like to emphasize that field knowledge is often knowledge on 'how things work in the reality'. Field knowledge can be gained by living in a (certain) system of higher education, but this in itself is not sufficient as an academic goal. There is a need to systematize the relevant categories of field knowledge on higher education.

4. Discussion

In this chapter I have discussed the need to take seriously the social dynamics of national systems higher education. This is by no means a new need. Nor are the basic questions I have asked brand new. Burton Clark (1983) already who set the questions: How are systems integrated? How does change take place? And other questions which help to analyze the social dynamics of national higher education system - together with other classics in the field of higher education (see Becher & Kogan 1992, Bourdieu 1988). My concern is, in turn, why is it so difficult to see these questions repeated and reflected on in so many comparative studies on higher education? Why is it so difficult to accept that there may be a variety of different answers to a limited number of questions?

If and when we continue to use the national system of higher education as a unit of analysis, then we should take the need to pay attention to social dynamics of each national system of higher education seriously. Since all higher education systems are embedded in their traditions and their societal contexts, there is no escape from historical perspectives. It is equally important to understand the important actors in all the national systems of higher education and how they interplay with each other. This requires, in turn, the application of sociological or political theories of human behavior for understanding the motives of different political actions. A good example of this kind of comparative study is provided by the comparative analysis policy changes in England, Norway and Sweden (Kogan et al. 2000). This study sets a continuous example to all of us, who try to increase our understanding on how higher education works.

I have written this article in the Research Institute for Higher Education, at the Hiroshima University. This matter of fact may also have given some insights into the topic, because many reflections with my Japanese colleagues on the similarities and differences between Finnish and Japanese higher education make it an inescapable fact that understanding a different system of higher education requires field knowledge on how things work out in reality. In line with these reflections, I have also tried to show in this chapter that in addition to theoretical understanding it is necessary to have more structured field knowledge on different higher education systems.

One of the benefits of a comparative research is the fact that comparative interest of knowledge challenges us to change our intellectual perspective. It is, indeed, useful to try to understand one's own (familiar) higher education system from the perspective of other systems, or to seek to understand other systems of higher education from the perspective of one's own system. A real cultural challenge for a higher education researcher is trying to be culturally sensitive in order to be able to recognize not only things that are different (and easy to see), but also to try to learn about things that one assumes to understand because of their (seeming) similarities.

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