

# Chapter 1

## The Politics of Higher Education Policy in Canada, the U.S., and Western Europe – An Introduction



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**Abstract** Higher education policy has become a more salient issue in modern states as universities are increasingly important for societal and economic development. This leads to an increased politicisation of this policy area. At the same time, there is a lack of comparative scholarship studying the politics of higher education policy on both sides of the Atlantic. This is the gap that this volume addresses. This chapter introduces the idea behind the volume. It describes the rationale for studying the politics of higher education policy as well as the specific regional focus on Canada, the U.S., and Western Europe. Moreover, it introduces the conceptual framework underpinning the volume which combines sociological and historical institutionalism. Additionally, the chapter specifies the comparative approach applied in the volume and describes considerations regarding its research design. Finally, it introduces the structure of the volume and provides an overview over the different sections that follow.

### Increasing Salience and Secluded Research Communities – Higher Education Policy on Both Sides of the Atlantic

This volume focuses on higher education policy and the political processes that shape this policy area with a regional focus on Western Europe, Canada, and the U.S. There are two main rationales behind this focus: (1) the growing importance of

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higher education policy and teaching and research activities themselves, and (2) the lack of comparative scholarship that includes cases from both sides of the Atlantic.

Regarding the first rationale, the volume is rooted in the observation that the political importance of higher education has increased over the last decades in most countries. As part of this trend, higher education policy became more relevant for different societal actors including politicians and citizens but also interest groups. Various factors play a role in this increase in salience of higher education policy. These factors interact and make higher education a central policy area for the development of modern states and societies (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014). The first factor is that there has been continuous massification of higher education, implying that an increasing percentage of the population is participating in some form of higher education (Andres & Pechar, 2013; Garritzmann, 2016). This has led to growing public (and private) investments in the sector (Altbach et al., 2009; Garritzmann, 2016), which made both politicians and citizens more sensitive to developments in higher education.

Second, in several respects higher education has gradually become a policy area that is more relevant for other policy arenas. As societies face an increasing amount of grand challenges, such as climate change or global health crises, that are perceived to depend on policy solutions stemming from higher education, universities are more and more faced with the expectation to provide such solutions to other policy areas (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2022) and that public policies should rely on or be influenced by results of scientific research. In that sense, we see organizations emerging that aim to achieve that goal. For example, networks like the International Network for Government Science Advice<sup>1</sup> (INGSA) aim to facilitate exchanges between researchers and high-level policy makers to produce better policies informed by science.

Finally, the move towards knowledge economies or knowledge societies strengthened the role of higher education as a motor for research and innovation activities that support the growth and future development of national economies (Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). All these factors led to greater political relevance of higher education and an increased politicisation (Busemeyer et al., 2013). The rise of concepts linked to New Public Management (NPM) (Paradeise et al., 2009a, b) and a growing focus on the efficiency of public sectors combined with ideas about active welfare states (Gingrich, 2011, 2015), connected the development of higher education to political debates on public sector reforms (Braun, 2008). Thus, higher education became a more relevant issue in various policy arenas, and at the same time new actors became more active in policymaking for this sector, creating a multi-level, multi-actor, and multi-issue policy environment (Chou et al., 2017).

Regarding the second rationale, this volume builds on the argument that over the last 15–20 years, research on the politics of higher education policy took place in, by and large, secluded academic communities on both sides of the Atlantic (see e.g. Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011; Gift & Wibbels, 2014). While being scholarly

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.ingsa.org/>

active, these communities focused in their empirical work mainly on their own context using conceptual approaches which are typical for their environment, e.g. Down's median voter theorem in the U.S. (Dar, 2012), party politics approaches in Europe (Garritzmann & Seng, 2016), or institutions of Canadian federalism (Wellen et al., 2012). Moreover, they mostly refrained from comparing their findings to those from the other contexts. The few exceptions that include cases from both sides of the Atlantic (e.g. Cantwell et al., 2018) tend to lack a structured comparative approach. Thus, there is a clear gap in the literature that this volume attempts to fill by addressing the specific policy environments and research communities in the three contexts.

In doing so, this volume has three aims. First, to provide an overview of the existing literature on the politics of higher education policy structured in five key sub-themes in each of the different contexts (see below). Second, to present new and up to date empirical analyses in each context for every sub-theme. Third, to offer comparisons between the different contexts, both within each sub-theme and overall, regarding the politics of higher education policy.

Before we introduce the comparative design and the conceptual underpinning of this volume, we will provide a brief overview over the main strands of higher education policy literature in the three contexts. In the end of this introduction, we will also give a short overview over the structure of the volume.

## **The Main Strands of Higher Education Policy Scholarship in Canada, the U.S., and Western Europe**

Each of the three contexts covered in this volume has its own traditions in higher education policy research as well as certain specificities regarding conceptual focus or key lines of inquiry. To provide an introduction into the volume, we will use this section to briefly summarize key characteristics of higher education policy research in the three contexts. This will only be a brief overview and more in-depth discussions of the literature can be found in the respective chapters.

In the beginning, it is necessary to briefly address the multi-level characteristics of each environment. On the one hand, Western Europe is a complex area as it covers many different countries with different higher education as well as political systems, most of which are members of the European Union (EU) or linked to the EU through some form of agreements. In addition, an inter-governmental or maybe even supranational policy-making level has developed in European higher education through the Bologna Process and the subsequent European Higher Education Area (EHEA) as well as the activities of the European Commission (Ravinet, 2008; Vukasovic et al., 2018). This has led to a certain level of policy convergence, while at the same time national policy differences persist leading to an ongoing debate about the degree of homogeneity in European higher education policy (Dobbins & Knill, 2014; Vukasovic, 2013b; Vukasovic et al., 2017). Thus, in the European

context there are both national as well as supra-national policymaking dynamics at play. In addition, some countries in Western Europe are themselves federal countries similar to the U.S. or Canada, Germany being one example here (Capano, 2015; Jungblut & Rexe, 2017). In these countries, one can not only observe multi-level dynamics between national and supranational policymaking but also between national and subnational policymaking (Carnoy et al., 2019). This makes direct comparison of the three contexts more difficult. However, since our main interest is in identifying policymaking dynamics in the different contexts including multi-level characteristics, this increased complexity still makes comparison feasible while demanding proper contextualisation (Chou et al., 2017). This will be discussed in the different comparative chapters as well as the conclusion.

Moreover, it is necessary to have a clear definition of what is understood as Europe in the context of this volume. As a first demarcation, this volume will focus on Western Europe. The main reason for this is that the countries of Central Eastern Europe have a significantly different heritage due to their communist past, which had an impact both on higher education and politics in these countries (Huisman et al., 2018). Therefore, to limit the variation within the countries included in the European part of the book, the chapters addressing Europe will focus on the Western part of the continent. This includes member countries of the EU but also countries that are part of the EHEA such as Norway or the UK. In addition, to ensure that the diversity among European countries is well represented, the chapters will each include multiple countries in their analysis. However, as the different political dynamics that will be studied in each of the five sections (see below) might demand differing cases to properly illustrate them, the specific case countries will vary. At the same time, each chapter will discuss in the literature review studies that focus on a broad set of countries so that the chapter is properly embedded in the wider European context.

In the U.S. and Canada, on the other hand, higher education policy is within the authority of the sub-national entities, e.g. states, provinces or territories, with only a very limited role for the federal government. In a way, this multi-level relationship is similar to the EU's limited authority for higher education policy vis-à-vis the member states or the intergovernmental nature of the EHEA: Similar to the U.S. and Canadian federal governments, the EU and the EHEA do not have top-down hierarchical competences in higher education policy but rather rely on inter-governmental coordination and steering through the provision of funding as key tools to influence policymaking on lower levels in the policymaking hierarchy. At the same time, it is obvious that federal polities like Canada or the U.S. are inherently different in their structure from Europe's supranational policymaking environment that in itself includes federally organised countries (Carnoy et al., 2019). Even if the three polities differ in their level of complexity, policymaking responsibilities, and dynamics of horizontal or vertical policy coordination, comparing how the politics of higher education policy play out is still a valuable exercise. Especially as the comparative focus of this volume is less on the empirical aspects of each context but rather on the mechanisms and dynamics that influence policymaking (Chou et al., 2017). Thus, even if the contexts are structured differently, how they solve similar challenges in

policymaking is insightful as it helps us to look beyond context-specificities and uncover whether there are more general patterns driving political processes.

There is also a multi-level dynamic and considerable variation within both North American contexts. However, due to the constitutional arrangements in both countries that specify the area of influence for the federal and sub-national entities, the relationship between the levels is less complex than in Europe. At the same time, dynamics such as policy learning or policy convergence between sub-national entities can also be observed here (Hearn et al., 2017; McLendon et al., 2005), making the three contexts more alike regarding the complexity of policymaking. Due to the diversity within the two North American contexts, the Canadian and U.S. chapters will each cover a sample of states, provinces or territories that represent typical cases for their sub-theme. Like the European context, the analysis of these cases will be contextualized through the literature review. For the Canadian chapters, special attention has been given to ensure that the linguistic divide and specific policymaking context in Anglophone and Francophone Canada will be properly addressed in each sub-theme, which is itself a rare intention in the literature.

When looking at recent debates in the higher education policy literature in Europe, one can see that research has especially focused on the one hand on policy actors, such as the ministerial bureaucracy, or on the other hand on what Clark called the “academic oligarchy” (Clark, 1983) in the context of on-going discussions on institutional autonomy of universities (see e.g. Christensen, 2011; Enders et al., 2013; Maassen, 2017). In addition, there is a growing focus on different types of interest groups or stakeholder organizations that are active in higher education (Brankovic, 2018; Vukasovic, 2017; Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). Moreover, the importance of existing politico-administrative structures (see e.g. Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2013, 2018; Capano, 2015), or the role of multi-level dynamics in the context of the Bologna Process (Chou et al., 2017; Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Vukasovic et al., 2018; Vögtle et al., 2011) are increasingly topics for empirical analysis. In parallel, scholars using a political economy or party politics approach started to include higher education in their work (e.g. Ansell, 2010; Berg et al., 2023; Busemeyer, 2015; Garritzmann, 2016; Jungblut, 2016, 2017; Willemse & de Beer, 2012). They mainly focus on the redistributive effects of higher education systems including aspects such as tuition fees, student support or participation levels.

Research on the politics of higher education policy in the USA is ascendant with many studies examining the role of a complex set of actors in the political processes. Politico-administrative structures, which in the USA are primarily the state-level higher education agencies, are of particular interest to researchers analysing their influence in states due to wide variation of demographic, economic, and political contexts (Hearn & Ness, 2017; Rubin & Hearn, 2018; Tandberg, 2013). Scholars have also examined the rising influence of state governors (Tandberg et al., 2017), state agency board dynamics (Bastedo, 2005), and the individual state higher education executive officer (Tandberg et al., 2018). Interest group activity is another growing strand of research among U.S. scholars. This includes the lobbying activity at the federal government (Marsicano & Brooks, 2020) and in state governments (Ness et al., 2015). Intermediary organizations, which often work at the boundaries

of governments and higher education systems, are receiving more scholarly attention for their role in advocating for certain policies (Gándara et al., 2017; Miller & Morphew, 2017; Ness et al., 2021) and in framing policy issues (Gándara & Ness, 2019; Hammond et al., 2022; Orphan et al., 2021). Additionally, several studies also investigate interest groups' influence on higher education funding (McLendon, 2003; McLendon et al., 2009; Tandberg, 2010).

The rise of performance- or outcomes-based funding by U.S. states has generated significant scholarly attention in politics of higher education finance (Dougherty & Natow, 2015). These studies include examinations of how policies spread among states (McLendon, et al., 2006), the effectiveness of these policies in meeting their objectives (Hillman et al., 2014, 2015), and the burdens and benefits of these policies (Hagood, 2019; Umbricht et al., 2017). Many studies also examine the distinct effect of performance-based funding on community colleges (McKinney & Hagedorn, 2017; Tandberg et al., 2014), on minority-serving institutions (Boland, 2020; Jones et al., 2017), and on students under-represented in U.S. higher education (Favero & Rutherford, 2020; Gándara & Rutherford, 2018).

Perhaps the most ascendant topic in higher education policymaking in the USA is how various higher education policies and structures affect diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many policy organizations advocate for more attention to equity, such as Education Trust's call for race-conscious policy (Jones & Berger, 2019), American Council on Education's series on race in higher education (Espinosa et al., 2019), and the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce's report on higher education's role in reinforcing intergenerational privilege for white students (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013). Moreover, recent empirical studies report that state higher education funding is associated with state's racial composition (Taylor et al., 2020), that affirmative action bans are more likely in states with scarce access to the most prestigious public universities (Baker, 2019), and that social constructions of target populations (e.g., racially minoritized students) influence federal higher education policy (Gándara & Jones, 2020).

In Canada's decentralized federation, the ten provinces have jurisdiction over education as an enumerated power in the constitution but are influenced to varying degrees by the effects of fiscal federalism, as higher education is funded in part through transfers from the federal government. As a result, the higher education policy environment is shaped by multi-level, multi-actor characteristics including both federal and provincial governments. Canada's higher education scholarly environment is also shaped by the federation's distinctive Francophone and Anglophone contexts, including differing provincial legal and administrative structures and politico-administrative regimes. In the Anglophone tradition, higher education policy research has a well-established scholarship focussing on the changing role of the federal government in higher education, and its effects on provinces and institutions (Shanahan & Jones, 2007). In the Francophone tradition, higher education policy research is still in an early stage of development, having emerged more recently, largely in response to the increasing influence of the federal government on research and its effects on universities in Québec (Polster, 2002).

Emergent Canadian research continues to examine federal policy attention and effects, shifting from an earlier focus on public finance to other policy areas such as the origin and effects of federal research and innovation policy (Bégin-Caouette et al., 2021; Conteh, 2020; Metcalfe, 2010a, b; Sá & Litwin, 2011). A further emerging English language literature critically examines the process of transnational policy transfer and its impact on actors and institutions, including specific issues of institutional accreditation (Blanco Ramírez & Luu, 2018), degree quality assurance (Liu, 2016; Skolnik, 2016; Weinrib & Jones, 2014), and internationalization (Cover, 2016; Desai-Trilokekar & Jones, 2015; Guo & Guo, 2017; Sá & Sabzalieva, 2016, 2018; Tamtik, 2017; Williams et al., 2015). Beyond the federal focus, there is a continuing tradition of provincial-level policymaking studies, which tend toward policy histories with a political economy lens (Axelrod et al., 2011; Bégin-Caouette, 2018; Dennison & Schuetze, 2004; Fisher et al., 2009; Jones, 1991, 1997, 2004; Rexe, 2015a, b) or examinations of government steering (Eastman et al., 2022; Piché, 2015; Piche & Jones, 2016; Skolnik, 2013; Weingarten et al., 2013; Young et al., 2017); these studies typically examine institutional arrangements and the role of policy networks, non-state policy actors, and interest groups in those decision contexts.

Shifts in the political economy of higher education in English Canada has triggered critical evaluation of increasing market orientation, often focussing on implications for access (Dennison & Schuetze, 2004; Kirby, 2012; Ramdas, 2017). Lines of enquiry include examination of institutional adaptations to increased accountability and performance measurement (Maroy et al., 2017; Weingarten & Hicks, 2018a, b), governance reforms (Austin & Jones, 2018; Hall, 2017), and the increased role private higher education (McCartney & Metcalfe, 2018; Milian & Hicks, 2014; Pizarro Milian, 2018; Pizarro Milian & Quirke, 2017). In contrast, Québec has resisted increasing market orientation in higher education, and subsequently research has focussed on questions of government financing (Maltais, 2017, 2021).

Questions of equity, diversity, and inclusion have always been explored in Canadian higher education policy scholarship. One notable growing area of national attention is Indigenous education. There is increasing policy-informative research and Indigenous-oriented scholarship, including work on the creation and role of Indigenous institutions (Cole, 2011; Jenkins, 2007; Paquette & Fallon, 2014) and decolonization of institutions and institutional practices (Battiste et al., 2002; Mitchell et al., 2018; Pidgeon, 2008, 2016; Stonechild, 2006) to add to the continuing traditional policy analysis on issues of Indigenous peoples' educational inequality (Deonandan et al., 2019; Friesen & Krauth, 2012).

Overall, one can therefore state that, while higher education became politically more relevant for contemporary societies, the scholarly attention on the politics of higher education policy only recently started to catch up with this development (see also: Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011; Gift & Wibbels, 2014). Additionally, this process happened mainly in scholarly communities that operate within their regional context, sometimes lacking awareness of one another, and rarely embarking on inter-regional comparisons. At the same time, already the brief overview over the

main trends of the academic literature in the three contexts shows that there is a large overlap in actors, policy processes or topics that are addressed in the different communities.

## **A Comparative Approach to the Study of the Politics of Higher Education Policies**

To create a scholarly bridge between the research communities on both sides of the Atlantic, this volume applies a comparative research design (Lijphart, 1971). In this, there will be four comparative elements throughout the volume. First, there will be comparisons within each context in the respective chapters for each sub-theme. Here different European countries, U.S. states or Canadian provinces and territories will be compared to one another. On a second level, there will be comparisons between the three contexts within each sub-theme. To this end, a comparative chapter that brings together the main lessons from the three contexts will conclude each sub-theme. Finally, the concluding chapter will offer two types of comparisons. On the one hand, a comparison between the policy-making dynamics in the different sub-themes, and, on the other hand, a comparison between the three contexts on a general level and across the five sub-themes.

In the comparisons between contexts, the focus will be on two somewhat competing conceptualisations of organizational change processes that are applied regularly also in studies of higher education policy. Both approaches belong to the family of institutional theories, which have as a common denominator that they see local actors as being affected by institutions (Hall & Taylor, 1996; March & Olsen, 1984; Meyer, 2008). Where they differ is in the question whether these institutions are built up by the wider environment of the actors or whether institutions are constructed through historical processes and thus in the history of the actors themselves.

Regarding the former, this volume will take a starting point in an observation promoted by the phenomenological version of sociological institutionalism, which sees actors and organizations not only influenced by their wider environment but as constructed by and in it (Meyer, 2008). In this understanding, global norms and trends, like the ones that have been presented in the first section of this chapter, should lead to a situation, where one can observe common developments as actors must relate to accepted and often globalized norms. This is summarized in the rationalization assumption, which has received a prominent place in neo-institutional analyses of organizations including universities (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Ramirez & Meyer, 2013). The key assumption in this is that the global spread of rationalized formal organizations leads to the development of similar structures in organizations that fulfil the same function in very different contexts. Thus, local organizations more and more adhere to a general, global model and thus become alike (Drori et al., 2006). If the assumptions behind the rationalization argument are valid, then one would expect that the politics of higher education policy also become more



similar as world-wide rationalization trends would call for convergence of decision-making structures and policies. Similar arguments have also been made by scholars focusing on globalization and international organizations, such as the OECD or the World Bank, as key drivers for global policy convergence (Komljenovic & Robertson, 2017; Martens & Jakobi, 2010; Martens et al., 2007; Robertson et al., 2016). Thus, following the sociological institutionalist line of argumentation, one should be able to observe policymaking dynamics in higher education that are or become more alike in the three contexts studied in this volume as globalization and rationalization create converging institutional contexts to which actors and organizations have to relate.

Regarding the latter of the two approaches, authors belonging to this school of thought focus less on globalized norms and convergence through rationalization but instead highlight the importance of habits, customs and other historically grown institutional arrangements, forming what is labelled as historical institutionalism (Thelen, 1999; Thelen & Mahoney, 2010). This approach has not only been applied when studying organizational change but also in studies examining policy changes over longer periods of time (see e.g. Garritzmann, 2016). In this understanding, decisions that have been taken in the past and that led to the formation of institutional arrangements will influence decision-making processes in the present as they affect the (political) costs of decisions and thus can create path-dependencies or policy legacies. This rests on the idea that the further away a desired change is from the status-quo, the bigger the costs associated to successfully implementing the change will be. Thus, the historically grown institutional (and policy) environment of a specific context might make certain global reform trajectories more or less costly. Therefore, there are authors (e.g. Christensen et al., 2014) who argue that global rationalization trends, as described by sociological institutionalism, are actually not directly copied from one context to another but rather undergo local translation. In this, factors such as national or regional cultures, higher education systems, political actors, or policy legacies act as filters for global rationalization trends as they influence the costs associated with the implementation of a reform. As a result, these filters contribute to path-dependence of countries or contexts and enable the existence of persisting differences regarding both higher education policies and politics around the world and thus also between the three contexts that this volume focuses on.

Based on these two somewhat contradicting conceptualisations of change processes, the chapters comprising this volume will investigate in how far each of the three contexts is experiencing convergence along the line of sociological institutionalism or whether historical institutionalism with its focus on path dependence is more helpful in understanding change processes in a given context. In addition, the comparative chapters and the conclusion will also draw on the tension between those conceptual approaches to identify in how far the politics of higher education policy on the two sides of the Atlantic are characterised by convergence or persisting divergence, and what this tells us about the nature of policymaking on higher education today.

Based on these two conceptual considerations, the comparisons in this volume will allow us to uncover if and where one can observe conversion regarding the politics of higher education policy, and where one finds persisting differences and path-dependence. Through this the comparison will not only shed more light on the commonalities and differences between the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe, but it will also contribute to the ongoing scholarly debate on the global rationalization of higher education as well as the globalization of higher education policies. Finally, the comparative approach also helps to get a better understanding of each of the individual contexts, as contextual specificities of, for example, U.S. higher education policy become more visible when comparing U.S. dynamics to the ones in the other contexts. Moreover, it is possible that specific entities in each region face similar situations, which will be highlighted through the comparison. It could be possible, for example, that Californian higher education and higher education in Ontario or higher education in France and Québec cope with similar challenges or show similar political dynamics.

Comparing the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe regarding the politics of higher education policy is not only relevant for the development of scholarship in this area because of a lack of comparative studies, but also because this inquiry could better inform policy and practice within each of these contexts. Moreover, all three contexts cover some of the most prominent higher education systems in the world, whose universities dominate international rankings and are often used as reference points for developments in other regions of the world.

As mentioned above, this volume will investigate five key sub-themes in the politics of higher education policy. Two of these take their starting point in the central tools that governments have to steer higher education. Even in times of growing institutional autonomy and global trends towards educational expansion, governments still determine the key frameworks in which higher education institutions function. For this, they mainly rely on two instruments: the governance of and public funding for higher education.

The first of these issues, focuses on the governance mode used to control higher education. Public actors in the political arena, such as governments, political parties, legislators, or state bureaucrats can be expected to have a privileged role in the formulation and design of higher education policy due to their function in the state structure. Thus, understanding their role for higher education policymaking in different contexts is central for analysing policy changes. The second theme covers the dynamics of public versus private spending for higher education, the way in which the state distributes public funding to universities and the implications of different funding arrangements. Due to the growing importance of stakeholder-based governance in higher education intermediary organizations and interest groups – including e.g. think tanks, rectors' conferences, university alliances or foundations – play an increasing role in political debates on higher education in the different contexts. Therefore, another sub-theme will focus on the role of interest groups in the three contexts.

The fourth sub-theme will address framing of higher education policy. As higher education becomes more relevant for other policy areas, policy actors start to frame

higher education policy in different ways. This allows them to generate links to specific debates in other policy areas, highlighting certain aspects of the policy field while at the same time tuning down others. Finally, as political actors are increasingly linked to one another through network-like structures (see: Paradeise, 2012; Paradeise et al., 2009b), and since there is a growing number of processes of both vertical and horizontal policy exchange, the transfer of policy from one jurisdiction to others in the form of policy diffusion becomes more frequent (McLendon et al., 2006; Ravinet, 2008; Vukasovic, 2013a, b; Vögtle et al., 2011). While in the European context these processes are often identified to take place vertically through up- and downloading between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the national policymaking arenas, in Canada and the USA they happen more horizontally between states or provinces and territories (McLendon et al., 2005). Thus, the final sub-theme addresses policy diffusion.

The chapters in this volume will rely on different conceptual approaches, which are chosen based on the appropriateness to the respective context. The reason for this is that the polity, meaning the structure of the political systems, in the three contexts is inherently different and these differences make some conceptual approaches more or less appropriate in a given context. For example, the structure of political parties in the U.S. as catch-all organisations that are mainly focused on winning elections and that lack a strong ideological coherence is better suited for analyses employing a Downsian median voter approach (see e.g. Dar, 2012; Dar & Lee, 2014), while European party politics with its strong ideological foundation and balance between office- and policy-seeking attributes is better analysed using partisan concepts (see e.g. Berg et al., 2023; Busemeyer et al., 2013; Garritzmann & Seng, 2016; Jungblut, 2016). Thus, the different contexts in this volume affect the appropriateness of certain conceptual lenses to guide scholarly work.

## Structure of the Volume

This volume is structured in six main parts following this introduction. The first five parts each address one sub-theme and consist of three chapters, with each chapter addressing one of the specific contexts. The chapters are both summarising the central literature in their area and provide, based on this comprehensive overview, a new empirical analysis that further advances our knowledge on the politics of higher education policy. Each part is complemented by a brief comparative chapter, which summarises the results from each context. Through this each part does not only present detailed studies of each context but also a reflection on similarities and differences. The final part provides an overall comparison on the different sub-themes of the politics of higher education policy across the three contexts. In addition, it presents conclusions of the volume, suggestions for avenues of future research, as well as implications for other regions. Each of the parts is now introduced in greater detail.

## ***Part I – The Politics of Higher Education Governance Reforms***

The first instrument for politics to exert influence over higher education is the governance mode, which determines the relation between higher education and the state as well as the level of direct influence that public authorities have over higher education institutions. In line with Olsen's central question of what kind of university for what kind of society (Olsen, 2007), political preferences matter concerning the governance mode that governments implement in relation to higher education. However, there are overarching trends that are identified in the literature, such as the move towards more institutional autonomy and greater use of market mechanisms (Christensen, 2011; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Gornitzka et al., 2017; McLendon & Ness, 2003; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). Additionally, the existing governance regimes are often found to create path-dependencies limiting the room to manoeuvre for political actors. Thus, governance reforms are often an interaction of general trends, political preferences, and existing arrangements, which differ significantly between the three contexts.

## ***Part II – The Politics of Higher Education Finance***

The second part addresses the politics of financing higher education, which is maybe the most intensively debated issue in the literature on higher education politics. Due to the complex re-distributive capacities of higher education, the question whether public spending for higher education has a re-distributive or a reverse re-distributive effect is still not completely settled (Ansell, 2010; Garritzmann & Seng, 2016). As funding for higher education is one of the two core instruments that governments use to steer higher education, a central question concerning the politics of higher education finance is linked to the level of public funding for higher education especially in relation to its level of access. However, also the level of private spending (i.e. tuition fees) and the system of student subsidies are relevant factors when analysing the politics of higher education finance. In Europe national governments and the parties composing them are the main actors that shape politics in this area (Garritzmann, 2016; Jungblut, 2016), while in the U.S. policy-making is an interplay between a complex set of actors including, for example, governors, legislatures, or interest groups (Tandberg, 2010). Canada takes up an intermediary position and the specific dynamics are highly dependent on the province or territory.

## ***Part III – Framing of Higher Education Policy***

Higher education is a policy field that is going through a process of re-framing. While in the decades before massification, higher education was in the first place an elite issue, it transformed during the 1970s to a topic debated in the frame of the

welfare state and policies of social mobility (Jungblut, 2014; Maassen et al., 2012). In a second more recent process, the debate surrounding the knowledge economy led to a growing discussion around higher education as a tool to support economic growth, innovation and economic competitiveness (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2011). At the same time, higher education is more and more expected to function as a transversal problem solver for other policy areas (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2011), again leading to more salience in political debates. The processes of re-framing of higher education can be regarded as an opportunity for different actors to shift the debate as well as their position on issues related to it by debating it in a different policy frame (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Through such a process an actor can highlight different aspects of a policy without formally changing the core of his/her position, simply by addressing it in a different setting (Daviter, 2007). Thus, this possibility to debate higher education, in, for example, the context of welfare policy or economic policy, gives actors more room to manoeuvre in contemporary policy discussions.

#### ***Part IV – Intermediary Organisations and Interest Groups in Higher Education Policy***

Intermediary organizations are a specific set of actors that receive a growing amount of attention in the literature on both sides of the Atlantic. In North America, a plurality of interest groups is active in higher education policy. Especially in the U.S. following the trend towards policy privatization, interest groups play a significant role, and a more diverse set of groups is active in higher education. These include not only higher education institutions themselves but also university alliances, Political Action Committees (PACs), classical lobby groups, or charitable foundations like the Lumina Foundation (Ness et al., 2015). In the European context, interest groups are mainly related to collective actors. Here especially the governance regime used in the EHEA that recognises a certain set of interest groups as legitimate representatives of different groups within the higher education sector is a key determinant (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Vukasovic, 2018; Vukasovic et al., 2017). These groups include student unions, representative bodies of universities and other higher education institutions, but also labour unions and employer representatives. In Canada, one can find a mixture of the U.S. and European dynamics.

#### ***Part V – Policy Transfer and Diffusion in Higher Education***

Policy transfer is a process by which policies travel from one context to another and political actors use policy-making examples from other contexts to copy, adapt or learn something for their own policy-making (Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000). These processes are found to be increasingly relevant for politics of higher education

policy in the three contexts. In the U.S. and Canada, policy transfer mainly happens horizontally between states, provinces or territories, which sometimes emulate policies from their neighbours (McLendon et al., 2005). Vertical diffusion from the federal level to the sub-national entities is less common also due to the clear separation of responsibilities. Contrary to that, in Europe policy diffusion happens mainly in a vertical way. Following the growing Europeanization of higher education policy, the different nation states are increasingly involved in up- or downloading of policies to and from the European level (Ravinet, 2008; Vukasovic, 2013a). Through these processes, national-level reforms are justified through European labels.

## ***Part VI – Comparison and Conclusion***

The final part of the volume provides an overview of the politics of higher education policy in the three contexts. Referring to the opposing expectations regarding global rationalization of higher education versus local translation or path-dependence, the chapter will discuss in how far the politics of higher education policy are converging in the three contexts. In doing so, it will highlight similarities and differences between the contexts and point to the roots of these differences. Moreover, it will present some concluding thoughts on the overall topic of the book as well as highlight what the research communities in the three contexts can learn from one another and develop a research agenda to offer several suggestions for further comparative research across the different contexts.

## **Conclusion**

In this introductory chapter, we presented the rationale behind the choice of topic for this volume. We believe that given the increasing salience of higher education policy, the somewhat secluded research communities in the three contexts, and the lack of comparative scholarship that includes cases from both sides of the Atlantic, there is a need for a structured comparison of the politics of higher education policy in the Canada, the U.S., and Western Europe. We want to address this gap in the literature with this volume. We hope that the following chapters will not only provide an overview of the state of the art of higher education policy research as well as new empirical analyses, but also serve as an entry point for increased scholarly collaboration and comparisons across the Atlantic. Moreover, with our conceptual starting point in the opposing expectations regarding global rationalization versus local translation and historical path-dependence, we hope to contribute to the discussion whether global higher education policy dynamics are characterized by conversion or diversity. Overall, we firmly believe that a comparative approach to the study of the politics of higher education policy as it is applied in this volume, can be very illustrative in highlighting contemporary policy-making dynamics and help to improve future scholarship.

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