Chapter 9
Globalisation and Neo-liberal Higher Education Reforms

David Turner

Abstract The chapter argues that globalisation and neo-liberalism are inadequate frameworks of theoretical analysis for examining, or even describing, national policy and responses to national policy in different settings. The suggestion that we are seeing a developing isomorphism in higher education is mistaken. This is not an argument that denies the increasing developments of international links and the (mis-)application of similar policies in different contexts. There are many, observable social phenomena that might well be described by the terms "globalisation" and "neo-liberalism", but those globalised policies produce different outcomes in different contexts. If we are to understand those different outcomes, we will need modes of analysis which can incorporate local differences, at the very least at the national level, and possibly at still smaller levels of aggregation.

Keywords Comparative education · Educational policy · Globalisation · Higher education policy · Higher education reforms · International markets · Neo-liberalism

Globalisation and Neo-liberal Higher Education Reforms: Introduction

In this chapter I shall argue that globalisation and neo-liberalism are inadequate lenses through which to view the reforms of higher education that have taken place around the world since 1990 (Yolcu and Turner 2014). In the broader context of comparative education, the argument has been put forward that we are all subject to the same international pressures, and that there is growing convergence in national systems, and even that there is a spreading world culture that renders national differences irrelevant (Zajda 2018). The nation state, it is argued, is no longer relevant

D. Turner (✉)
University of South Wales, Pontypridd, UK
e-mail: david.turner@southwales.ac.uk

J. Zajda (ed.), *Globalisation, Ideology and Neo-Liberal Higher Education Reforms*, Globalisation, Comparative Education and Policy Research 21,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-024-1751-7_9

to the understanding of educational policy, because, to compete in increasingly competitive international markets, there are pressures to conform that transcend national sovereignty.

To pursue this argument, it is important to distinguish between globalisation and neo-liberalism as cultural phenomena, and globalisation and neo-liberalism as modes of analysis. I do not wish to argue that there is no such thing as globalisation. On the contrary, over the last 60 years there have been the most remarkable and comprehensive changes that might be described under the general heading of "globalisation" (Zajda 2015). The flow of money across frontiers, the ease and speed of communication, the availability of international transportation, the integration of networks and supply chains for manufacturing and retail, the rise of global corporations that have a direct impact in all countries of the world, have all been transformed beyond recognition. When I was a child, international travel for leisure purposes was relatively rare. As recently as the 1990s, there were many countries where the transfer of money was rigidly restricted. And surely nobody needs to be reminded that Google and Amazon have changed the way that we live. From the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to the General Agreement on Trade and Services, we have seen progressive moves to create a world system of trade under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation.

Similarly, it would be foolish to deny that neo-liberalism has been a potent force in politics and economics around the world (Yolcu and Turner 2014; Zajda 2014). Since the period of "Reaganomics" in the 1980s, neo-liberalism, in the sense of promoting individual responsibility and reducing the role of the state, has been a potent influence on policy. Neo-liberalism has been widely used as an excuse for reducing state support and for removing interventions that are designed to reduce inequality in societies as diverse as the United States and South Africa.

However, if there is one consistent lesson from comparative education it is that intra-group variation is always greater than inter-group variation. At the national level, this means that we should expect huge variations among the richest countries in the world, as well as among the poorest in the world, variety that is much greater than the differences between rich and poor countries. Although we cannot ignore the phenomena of globalisation and neo-liberalism, it would be irresponsible to assume that all nations will respond similarly to those global trends. Globalisation and neo-liberalism are not the most important aspects of higher education reforms, and their impact can only be understood in terms of very specific national contexts. Consequently, as a form of analysis, excessive dependence on the theoretical frameworks offered by globalisation and neo-liberalism is totally inadequate. Higher education reforms can only be fully and properly understood in the context of nation-specific elements, and those who argue that globalisation renders the nation state obsolete as a unit of analysis are completely mistaken.

Of crucial importance in this context is the concept of path dependence. What a system is, and how it responds to external pressure, depends upon the historic sequence of events that brought the system to its current position. Two individuals, or two countries, that are extremely similar on all measured parameters may nevertheless respond to a new policy in very different ways. Their histories will predispose

them to respond in different ways. For this reason, only a partial analysis can result from the application of concepts of globalisation and neo-liberalism, and there will be a need to revive nation-specific profiles or something that would once have been described as "national character". Indeed, key concepts of globalisation and neo-liberalism may be interpreted quite differently in different national contexts, and what they mean may vary according to the national or linguistic context.

Some Examples of Loss in Translation

If we take even the simplest concepts of globalisation, we can see that there is considerable difficulty produced when these words travel. Indeed, it is not simply a matter of words, since the etymology of words, and the context of language in which they are used, can influence the way in which those words are associated with emotions and purposes.

One of the key concepts in globalisation, and an outcome of the idea that education, especially higher education, should prepare the individual to be a productive worker, is the notion of "competence" (as a noun). A competence, which is broadly equated with a skill, is something that a person has, an ability to do something, which they can take to the market place as product and sell. A competence is something, an object that one has. Where once we thought of education as a process of self-development, through which a rounded personality was created, or at least enabled, we now think of people as fundamentally unchanged, but through education they are able to acquire these add-on abilities. This is in stark contrast to the earlier concept of a skilled craftsperson, a person who not only had a skill, but through acquiring that skill had developed the patience, judgement and pride in their work that rendered that skill effective.

In the early 1970s I spent some time in an establishment that trained skilled craftsmen (exclusively men) as toolmakers and fitters. The first 3 weeks of the training involved hand filing pieces of metal into shape. The milling and grinding machines that rendered hand filing and fitting redundant were already available and would form a later part of the training. So, the practical value of filing was doubtful. But it was thought that the process of making usable machine parts from metal by hand developed a sense of patience, a feel for the raw material of machinery and a sense of achievement in making something out of nothing that were necessary concomitants of possessing a skill. In its migration into the discourse of globalisation the word "skill" has been changed, not to say cheapened, into a description of a knack or ability that a person has, but which does not touch his or her central self-concept.

This new idea of a skill is captured in the word "competence". I would not wish to argue that this meaning of competence is neutral, since it clearly involves a specific interpretation of how we learn, how we function in the labour market, and how we incorporate what we have learned into our personality and self-image. However, the idea of a competence is really a neologism. Formerly, competence was, more or

less, an amorphous and indivisible quality that a person had. He or she was competent; able to perform a job with a certain degree of resilience in the face of unforeseen circumstances. The idea of dividing competence down into specific abilities, and of having a plural form of "competences" or "competencies" is a relatively recent development, which consequently fails to invoke any particular associations.

This might be contrasted with the use of the concept in Mexico, where I have seen the word "competence" translated as "competencia". While this might seem a perfectly straightforward translation of an English word to make it useful in the Spanish-language context, "competencia" is a pre-existing word in Spanish, and it means "competition", as might be used in the context of a race or contest.

Competition is not absent from the meaning of the word "competence" in English, in the sense that one of the great ideological achievements of neo-liberalism is to disseminate the idea that the purpose of education is to give the individual the skills to compete in the labour market. In this sense, it is argued that unemployment is the consequence of an individual being ill-equipped to compete. And because this engagement with the labour market is the responsibility of the individual, the state has no role in managing levels of employment or unemployment. The underlying message here is that the individual could, had they the will power, moral fibre or strength of character, improve his or her position by acquiring more competences. Obviously, this is nonsense. The possession of competences may explain who is employed, but at the level of society, if the labour market only creates a certain number of opportunities, the entry of one successful applicant into the labour market at one end will only push a former employee out at the other. But the belief that unemployment is a mark of individual failure rather than of societal failure is one of the great propaganda successes of globalisation and neo-liberalism.

So, one would not wish to say that the translation of "competence" into Spanish as "competencia" was wrong; the idea of competition hovers in the background of the developing use of the word in the Anglophone world. But the association is much more direct in Spanish than in English, and consequently the way the concept is interpreted differs from place to place. "Globalisation", "neo-liberalism" and their associated concepts are not truly global.

This is not only and purely a question of translation; even when a word like "governance" travels without translation, there may be differences in interpretation. To me, "governance" means the organisational structures through which accountability is secured. That is to say, it is a neutral term that can describe a range of different ways in which people can be held accountable, ranging from the dictatorial, through the bureaucratic to the democratic. But it is clear that in the context of Mexican higher education the concept of "governance" is far from neutral. Navarro Leal and Contreras Ocegueda (2014) offer an alternative interpretation, and imply that "governance", far from being neutral, implies specific modes of accountability. "Governance", in the hands of Navarro Leal & Contreras Ocegueda, but also in the hands of a number of authors whom they cite, becomes a particular mode of new management, in which the state engages private sector agencies to enforce its rules, while allowing apparent autonomy. This system, which Navarro Leal and Contreras

Ocegueda (2014, p. 76) describe as "steering from a distance", suggests a kind of puppet show in which the state continues to direct public institutions at the same time as maintaining plausible deniability.

Again, in the context of neo-liberal reforms, one can understand the point that the authors are making. Many systems of governance developed in higher education over the last four decades have been exactly of that form. But it is a restricted meaning of the word "governance". In the original English-language context it was possible to speak of good governance and bad governance. In the Mexican context, and perhaps more widely in Latin America, this is no longer possible, and all governance is bad governance. Open, transparent and democratic governance is seen to be an oxymoron.

The point that I am making here is not that the concepts of globalisation and neoliberalism have been mistranslated, misinterpreted, misunderstood or mis-anythingelse. Nobody owns the concepts, and the concepts can be reinterpreted in different contexts. One can understand why the ideas may have different associations and receive different emphasis according to the settings in which they are applied. But that means, very simply, that globalisation is not a global phenomenon. If we are to understand what globalisation means in a particular national context, we will need to understand the peculiarities of that national setting. And if we wish to understand how specific policies, whether borrowed from international think tanks or not, will play out in a specific context we will need something like an understanding of national character, or national dispositions, in addition to any frameworks of globalisation that we may have.

The Antidote to Globalisation

The best way of overcoming the spell that globalisation has cast over the analysis of educational phenomena is to look at the data about what actually happens in educational systems. Figure 9.1 uses data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics database (http://data.uis.unesco.org/), and shows the proportions of students studying in higher education in each of seven different subject specialisations for the years 1998 to 2014 in Australia.

The tallest bars at the back of the figure are for the subjects of social sciences, business and law. These show a clear upward trend in the early years of the century, peaking around 2006, and then dropping off. In contrast with that, there is a rising trend in health and welfare throughout the period (the next sequence of bars). Neither science nor engineering show any marked trend one way or the other, although the number of science students seemed temporarily to rise in the years 2000 to 2005. After an initial drop in the proportion studying humanities and arts, the numbers in those subjects also remain fairly constant. The proportion studying education is steady throughout, while the proportion studying agriculture is small and declining.

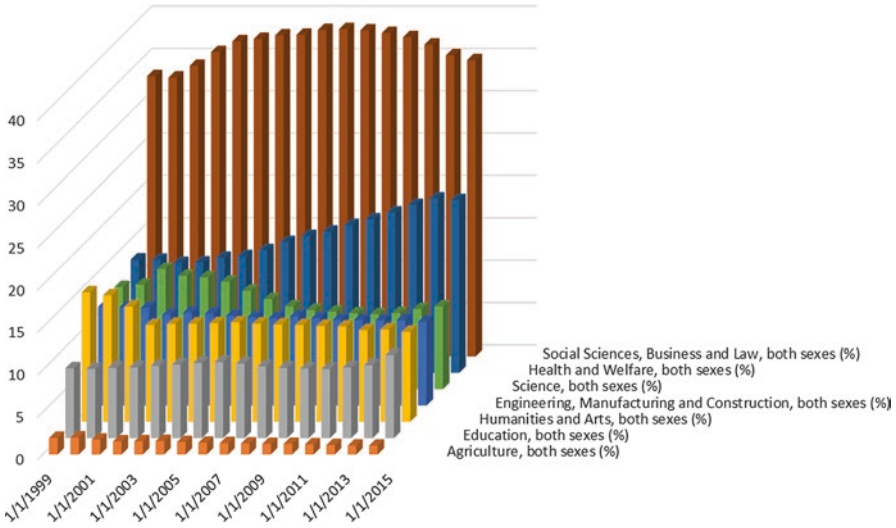

Fig. 9.1 Percentage of students studying subjects in Australian higher education

Similar graphs can be drawn for many countries for which there is data held by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, and the different trends in the popularity of various subjects can be compared. If globalisation alone could account for those trends, we would expect to see similar patterns in different countries. We might, for example, expect to see health and welfare rise as the age of populations rise and more resources are needed for the elderly. We might expect to see numbers rise in the social sciences and humanities (associated with service industries) and fall in engineering (associated with manufacturing industry) as economies age and become more mature. Or alternatively, we might see engineering and science rise, driven by a nearly global government emphasis on STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics). We see none of those trends. Or, at least, none of these trends is universal.

More precisely, we see each of those trends very clearly, but only in a few specific national systems. So, as with Australia, we see a rise in health and welfare in higher education in Japan and Denmark, but not much elsewhere. We see a slight decrease in science and engineering in many countries, but not all. And we see a sharp increase in engineering, but only in Iran. The proportion of students in education is consistently twice as high in Cuba as it is in Finland.

Each of these different changes in educational preferences make some kind of sense as responses to the restructuring of society and the development of the knowledge economy, but only in terms of elements of the national context. Expectations about what is required to be a qualified teacher in Cuba and Finland are different. Both Japan and Denmark have made concern for an ageing population a matter of priority. And so on.

But there are no overall trends. Even taking higher educational systems that appear to have much in common, using whatever criteria might seem appropriate,

similar countries have very different profiles. Scandinavian countries, Latin American countries, formerly socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Asian tigers, OECD countries or small island states – whatever groupings one forms demonstrate as much intra-group variation as they do inter-group variation, and no trends are consistent across all countries. This is what I think a comparative educationist would expect, but it seems to fly in the face of the theory that globalisation is producing homogeneity.

Butterflies and Bombs

In recent decades there has been growing interest among social theorists in complexity, and one of the most famous aspects of complexity theory is the butterfly effect. Called the "butterfly effect" because is it supposed to indicate that the flap of a butterfly's wing in the Amazon can produce a tornado in Texas, it embodies the idea that very small inputs can have major outcomes. How tornadoes develop is well understood. If we assume a small disturbance, such as the flap of a butterfly's wing, then the development of stronger and stronger cyclones driven by the energy of a hot atmosphere is more or less inevitable. What is less well understood is where and how those original disturbances arise, and why some disturbances give rise to tornadoes and others do not.

But in general, the idea that very small events can have large effects, is recognised to be a feature of complex systems. What is less well recognised it the corollary; very large inputs can have insignificant or negligible outcomes. While the flap of a butterfly's wing can produce a tornado, the tornado eventually dies away to nothing. The largest imaginable intervention in weather patterns, such as the explosion of an atom bomb, leaves almost no tract on weather systems a few days later. Small and easily overlooked events can have a massive impact, while huge and very evident events can leave no trace. Of course, this makes looking for evidence-based policy in complex systems very difficult, because the antecedents of outcomes that we are interested in may be very small, and by no means the most obvious features of the landscape. Situations that appear to be very similar on all major variables may nevertheless diverge and behave very differently, thanks to the presence of some differences that are so tiny that they escape notice.

Among other things, systems can differ because they have arrived at seemingly similar configurations by different routes. This is a feature that is described as "path dependence"; how a system got to its present state is likely to affect how it progresses in the future. In a series of experiments on blacksmiths, Bernstein (1967) sought to measure the optimum movements of a blacksmith in order to strike a rivet with a particular force. Inspired by Taylorist visions of time and motion, and a mechanical view of the universe, Bernstein at first thought that such a supposedly mechanical action as striking a rivet again and again would best be reproduced by identical movements of the shoulder, elbow and wrist. What he discovered was that the shoulder, elbow and wrist form a complex system with far too many degrees of

freedom to treat in a mechanical way. The only think that was consistently repeated, blow after blow, was the movement of the hammer head striking the rivet. But the combination of movements of shoulder, elbow and wrist was unique to each instance.

This is not surprising if we consider that each case of striking the rivet has to start from, or compensate for, the movements with which the hammer, shoulder, elbow and wrist leave the preceding cycle. And since each movement is unique, the starting conditions of each next movement are unique. Path dependence implies that apparently identical systems will respond to the same stimulus in rather different ways, so long as there are sufficient degrees of freedom in the system for it to behave as a complex system.

From this perspective we can see that the vision of globalisation that is put forward, that systems as complex as national systems of higher education will converge under the influence of similar pressures and reciprocal influence, is a view that is rooted in a mechanical and Newtonian vision of systems that is at least a century out of date (Zajda and Rust 2016).

But the idea of path dependence means much more than just that apparently similar systems can behave differently, or that inputs to a system can produce unexpected results. It means that history is important for understanding the current state of a system, and history is generally conceived in national terms. A person or a situation that is put in the same situation twice is likely to respond in very different ways on the two occasions. Although, of course, being in the same situation twice is impossible, since the two situations must be different; at the very least a memory of the first occurrence will be present in one and absent in the other.

This makes several approaches to policy very difficult. Evidence based policy, in the sense that it is usually understood, namely spotting "what works", is impossible, because identifying what is important in a situation is impossible. We apply a policy, and we see results. But whether it is possible to say that it is the policy that works is quite another matter. Most approaches to what is happening in a social setting are based on the assumption that we can form a concept of applying a policy in two distinct settings, "all other things being equal". But the idea of path dependence undermines any sense that all other things can be equal. The ramifications of this are too complex to go into here. Indeed, they may be too complex to grasp altogether, and may require a complete reconsideration of what it means for an event to be an effect or outcome, or for it to have causes or impacts. It may be necessary to rethink our concept of causation in social settings altogether.

Conclusion

Globalisation and neo-liberalism are theoretical frameworks that have been widely applied in the study of education in comparative contexts. There can be no doubt that globalisation and neo-liberalism have been potent forces, in the sense that specific theoretical frameworks have been applied in a wide range of contexts and

national systems. The ideas have been influential, both in how policy has been framed, and in how those policies and their effects have been interpreted. But in this chapter, I have argued that as modes of analysis, as opposed to social phenomena, they are completely inadequate. How concepts are interpreted is subject to contextual influences that are not universal. As a result, how policies are interpreted and implemented are very different in different national settings, as are the responses of different groups in society to those policies. To analyse social situations in higher education, something more is needed than a theory of either globalisation or neo-liberalism. What is needed is a sense of the local context, including its history and development. In short, even where uniform policies are applied globally, in order to understand what happens in each case, a theory of national heritage, or national character, will also be needed. Of course, this argument can be taken still further, and it can be argued, and indeed should be argued, that within a nation the intra-group differences are greater than the inter-group differences. New Yorkers may be American in a different way from the inhabitants of Houston. Parisians may respond to policy differently from the inhabitants of Marseille. And Londoners may be different from Liverpudlians. Indeed, inhabitants of north London may be different from the inhabitants of south London. But this is not an argument that recovers globalisation and neo-liberalism as a theoretical perspective; it simply means that any concept of national character should not be reified into something concrete. The nation state and national systems of education are a clumsy and provisional way of dealing with contextual difference. They are just much better than the belief that the world is flat.

References

Bernstein, N. A. (1967). *The co-ordination and regulation of movements*. Oxford: Pergamon Press.

Navarro Leal, M. A., & Contreras Ocegueda, K. (2014). Neo-Liberal reforms and governance in Mexican higher education. In D. A. Turner & H. Yolcu (Eds.), *Neo-liberal educational reforms: A critical analysis* (pp. 73–90). London: Routledge.

Yolcu, H., & Turner, D. (Eds.). (2014). *Neoliberal education reforms: A global analysis*. New York: Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Zajda, J. (2014). Globalisation and neo-liberalism as educational policy in Australia. In H. Yolcu & D. Turner (Eds.), *Neoliberal education reforms: A global analysis* (pp. 164–183). New York: Taylor & Francis/Routledge.

Zajda, J. (2015). (Ed.). *Second international handbook of globalisation, education and policy research.* Dordrecht: Springer. http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9789401794923

Zajda, J. (2018). *Globalisation and education reforms: Paradigms and ideologies* (pp. 79–91). Dordrecht: Springer. http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9789402412031

Zajda, J., & Rust, V. (Eds.). (2016). *Globalisation and higher education reforms.* Dordrecht: Springer. http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319281902