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2. THE INITIAL OBJECTIVES OF CHER TO FORM A PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCHERS

THE INITIAL OBJECTIVES OF CHER: THE INVITATION TO THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE

The initiative to found CHER was not just the intention of a few scholars knowing each other to form a club, but it was highly strategic. Actually, about 50 scholars from about 20 countries attended the conference “Research on Higher Education in Europe – Approaches, Results and Future Perspective” in November 1988. The conference was arranged in Kassel (Germany) to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Centre for Research on Higher Education and Work (Wissenschaftliches Zentrum für Berufs- und Hochschulforschung, since 2006 named Internationales Zentrum für Hochschulforschung or in English International Centre for Higher Education Research – INCHER-Kassel) of the Gesamthochschule Kassel (Comprehensive University of Kassel, later named Universität Kassel/University of Kassel). The conference was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation as an international workshop for exploring the state of research in the respective area. After the presentation and discussion of trend reports on various thematic areas of higher education research (see Neave & Teichler, 1989) the participants met on 26 November 1988 and agreed to form a loose, provisional association with the name – created at that meeting – “Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER)” (see Teichler, 2013).

Actually, the foundation of CHER had many spontaneous and informal elements. Various participants of the first meetings knew each other – personally in many instances from policy dominated meetings such as those arranged by OECD or UNESCO or academic conferences.

It was easy to get together keynote speakers for an inaugural conference – among them Ladislav Cerych and Ludwig Huber. The initiator suggested forming a network without putting forward a name, but Maurice Kogan spontaneously invented it. Scholars from different countries readily agreed to form a steering group: Jean-Claude Eicher (Dijon), Maurice Kogan (London), Roberto Moscati (Milano), Guy Neave (Paris), Ulrich Teichler (Kassel), Frans van Vught (Enschede) and Björn Wittrock (Uppsala). Other well-established scholars present agreed to help consolidate CHER, e.g. Tony Becher, Ladislav Cerych, Simon Schwartzman und Gareth Williams. And some other participants easily “joined the family” and subsequently took over important functions of communication and

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collaboration, e.g. John Brennan, Patrick Clancy, Egbert de Weert, Oliver Fulton and Christine Musselin.

However, the start of CHER was not a spontaneous decision. Rather, Ulrich Teichler – at that time director of the Centre in Kassel (Germany) – began about one year earlier to prepare the conference aimed at mapping the state of higher education research in Europe, and applied for respective financial support. He discussed the idea of creating such an association with two scholars who were respected among colleagues and who might signal as well that a new generation of higher education researchers would be willing to invest time and energy into international cooperation of higher education researchers: Guy Neave, at that time professor at London University, Institute of Education (United Kingdom), and Frans van Vught, at that time director of the Centrum voor Studies van het Hoger Onderwijs Beleid (CSHOB, in English Center for Higher Education Policy Studies, CHEPS) of the Universiteit Twente (Twente University) in Enschede (the Netherlands). They agreed to send out an invitation some months in advance of the conference to be held in Kassel suggesting to create regular cooperation among higher education researchers in Europe. The title of the letter of invitation was: “Research on Higher Education in Europe: Future Cooperation between Scholars and Research Units.”

The first paragraph of this letter of invitation is a compact implicit formulation of rationales by means of a critique of the status quo: “In Western Europe, research into higher education has advanced to the point at which fundamental theories are constructed. The approach between the different scholarly communities in Europe tends often to be a tenuous affair. The field is fragmented and the possibility to exchange ideas through which the area may advance further are sparse. Existing forums where such discussions have taken place tend to be linked with governmental or inter-governmental agencies. Associations of researchers, active though they are, appear to address only parts of the overall constituency.”

This means – translated into objectives:

1. There is a substantial qualitative potential of higher education to form cooperation with more ambitious aims.
2. Cooperation should cover all the thematic and disciplinary areas of higher education research.
3. Cooperation should bring together the higher education researchers from different countries.
4. There should be a specific forum for higher education research instead of, as it was previously the case, only platforms with a mix of higher education experts of different origins and different professional loyalties.

One certainly could argue that this invitation was implicitly a call for joint international comparative work. Further, it was obvious that the invitation did not strive for worldwide cooperation among higher education researchers, but rather referred to Western Europe. Finally, it should be pointed out that the subsequent paragraphs of the invitation pondered various possible modes of cooperation.

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In fact, these four or five objectives were the strategic core at the foundation and remained so over the years. In the official report on the first year of CHER, only one additional rationale was named: CHER should ensure a certain viable size of the community of higher education researchers.

CONSOLIDATING THE QUALITATIVE FUNDAMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Higher education researchers in Europe often are quite self-critical in characterizing the state of their field. As regards various issues of quality, we often note the arguments that higher education research tends to

1. be very descriptive,
2. be very much driven by acute policy discourses,
3. be undertaken by scholars who embark on too broad fields and have insufficient in-depth knowledge of their areas of research,
4. be so much shaped by national views and experiences that national peculiarities are interpreted as universal phenomena of higher education,
5. borrow concepts from disciplines rather than building up a genuine conceptual basis of higher education research, and to
6. be driven too much by the narrow perspectives of individual disciplines rather than combining a breadth of disciplinary perspectives necessary to understand the multi-faceted phenomena under consideration.

Moreover, there was a widespread notion among higher education researchers at the time CHER was founded that research in this area was very much at the beginning and still had to mature. This was reinforced by a transatlantic comparison: the situation of both academically based higher education research as well as that of applied higher education research in the United States was viewed by European scholars as vastly superior in quantity and quality.

The European higher education researchers who formulated the invitation for the foundation of CHER certainly did not disregard these critical views. Rather, they named various of these issues, as the quotation above shows. In the invitation to the founding conference in 1988, the second point and the fourth named above were underscored: "Much of the research as well as the diffusion of findings is, to a major degree, policy driven, focussing on specific national interests or brought to the notice of the scholarly community via such forums as the major government and international agencies – UNESCO, OECD, Council of Europe, or the European Communities." However, they spread the optimism that a certain threshold of potential was reached and that the potentials could be developed further through cooperation among higher education researchers in Europe. Thereby, they argued that the success of reaching a certain theoretical level of higher education research fuelled this optimism.

The strong emphasis on quality of research and the improvement of the theoretical basis of higher education research is visible in the choice of annual

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conference themes. In the first ten years, half of the first ten CHER meetings were arranged as reflections of the state of higher education research:

- The state of higher education research (achievements, conditions and challenges) in various thematic areas (Kassel 1988),
- Comparative higher education research (Enschede 1994 and Rome 1995),
- The relationships between higher education research and higher education policy (Alicante 1997), and
- The institutional basis of higher education research (Kassel 1998).

The emphasis on quality and theoretical improvements had an impact of the format of the annual conferences as well. Most of the time was devoted in the majority of the annual conferences during the first decade to plenary presentations or panels of key figures in the respective area, while little time remained for small working groups and for presentations of young scholars reporting some findings for the first time at an international conference. This made the major part of the conference a memorable experience for the participants, but was not conducive for the visible support of the young researchers' careers.

In the various official CHER documents of the first few years, emphasis was placed on quality and theoretical improvement, but this did not mean that CHER wanted to welcome only specific brands of higher education researchers. There were any formulations dividing researchers to theory-oriented versus applied researchers, academically based versus policy based researchers, etc. It was made clear only that CHER wants to bring together those active in higher education research, i.e. not including those who are not active in this area but are merely interested in the results of higher education research.

COOPERATION ACROSS THEMATIC AND DISCIPLINARY AREAS OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Higher education research – though being a small field in terms of the number of scholars involved, as will be discussed below – is characterized by a bewildering thematic breadth as well as by a multitude of contributing disciplines. This was underscored in a presentation by the author of this article at the 1994 CHER conference that focussed on the theme “Cross-National Studies in Higher Education.”

As regards disciplines: “The disciplines frequently named as contributing to higher education as a field of knowledge are history, law, economics and business studies, sociology, psychology, political science and education. Experts from other disciplines might be involved in higher education research as well, but their disciplinary contribution tends to be that of their field of knowledge not that of constituting the theories and methods of higher education research” (Teichler, 1996, p. 439).

The *Encyclopedia of Higher Education* edited by Clark and Neave (1992) presents a much longer list of disciplines dealing with higher education (see Becher, 1992) whereby some of these “disciplines” could be viewed as sub-

disciplines and some as theme-based areas of higher education research. The names of the respective articles in the Encyclopedia are as follows: anthropology, comparative education, economics, higher education studies, history, law, linguistics and rhetorical studies, literature, macro-sociology, organization theory, philosophy, policy analysis, political economy, political science, public administration, science studies, social psychology, women studies.

As regards thematic areas, often long lists are named. At the inaugural conference of CHER, higher education researchers were invited to address six broad thematic areas:

- Quantitative, structural and institutional developments of higher education,
- Higher education policy and administration,
- Teaching and learning, students and teachers,
- Science, research and the university,
- Higher education and industry, and
- Higher education and work.

In the 1994 presentation named above, a breadth of themes was clustered into four “spheres of knowledge in higher education”: “Typical *quantitative-structural aspects* are access, admission, elite and mass higher education, diversification, types of higher education institutions, duration of study programmes, graduation, educational and employment opportunities, job prospects, income and status, returns for educational investment, appropriate employment, mobility ... Major *knowledge and subject-related aspects* are disciplinarity versus interdisciplinarity, studium generale, academic versus professional emphasis, quality, skills and competences, utilization of competences, overqualification ... Some *person and process-related aspects* ...: motivation, communication, counselling and guidance, didactics, learning style, assessment and examinations ... Examples for *organisation and governance-related* aspects might be planning, administration, management, power and consensus, decision-making, efficiency and effectiveness, funding, resource allocation” (Teichler, 1996, pp. 441-442).

The first ten CHER conferences with a thematic emphasis actually addressed the following themes:

- Decision making in higher education (Enschede 1989),
- A changing Europe (Brussels 1990),
- Higher education finance (Dijon 1991),
- Higher education and the world of work (London 1992),
- Graduate education (Stockholm 1993),
- Governance and management (Turku 1996),
- The research function in higher education (Oslo 1999),
- The institutional dimension: Organisational aspects (Lancaster 2000),
- Higher education and its clients (Dijon 2001), and
- Higher education in the global age (Vienna 2002).

It was hoped in the late 1980s that CHER could succeed in bringing together the full breadth of disciplines and thematic areas of higher education. And the

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expectation was expressed that this would increase mutual understanding across disciplines, stimulate interdisciplinary research and lead to thematically more complex research designs. After 25 years, CHER certainly can claim to have contributed to a more complex discourse of higher education researchers across disciplinary and thematic areas, but still remained a lively and creative home for select fields and areas. Concepts deriving from sociology, political science, macro economics are well covered among members and the respective themes addressed, while those from education, psychology, business studies, law and history play a clearly lesser role. Disciplinary and thematic breadth and cross-fertilisation remain a challenge for the future.

AN INTERNATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE THRUST

In the initial documents of CHER, the situation of higher education in Western European countries is addressed in various respects in the call for a supra-national new network of higher education researchers.

- The national constituencies of higher education researchers in the various European countries were viewed as too small – overall or as consequence of thematic and disciplinary divides – to form the basis for national research associations.
- There were obvious language barriers. Most higher education researchers at that time published predominantly in their mother tongue. What was known about higher education across countries was published in the English language whereby information on higher education in English-speaking countries was dramatically overrepresented.
- There was a widespread view that research on higher education in the U.S. is strong and research on higher education in the various European countries is in its infancy. In the invitation to the founding conference of CHER in 1988, the following formulation was chosen: “Research exchange between Europe and the US in the higher education area has been especially fruitful. However, it concentrates only rarely on those issues or approaches that are emerging in Europe.” Obviously, the foundation of CHER was strongly shaped by observations of Western European higher education researchers about the scene of higher education research and by their views on the needs for future improvements. Two objectives of CHER frequently voiced in the initial years indicate the desire to overcome these problems in Western Europe.
- First, CHER was deliberately founded as a network apart from the U.S. that should strengthen the self-esteem of higher education researchers outside the U.S.
- Second, themes of the annual conferences were tackling the relationships between higher education and its societal environment (“social dynamics,” “renewed expectations,” “higher education and its clients,” etc.), thus reinforcing the strong interest in Europe in the macro-societal dimensions of higher education in contrast to – according to the Europeans’ perceptions – the

dominance of meso approaches and micro approaches in higher education research.

- Third, the European researchers underscored the relevance of comparative research and, thus implicitly, the belief in a broad variety of options of higher education that ought to be explored. This was seen as being in contrast to the U.S., where higher education researchers often seem to believe in universal elements and internationally (best) solutions. A prototypical example of the strength and weakness of the dominant reasoning of the U.S. researchers – in the eyes of Europeans – was Martin Trow’s model of “elite higher education,” “mass higher education” and “universal higher education”; the expected development was universal in nature, and it did not become true all over the world, because national governments resisted the universal wisdom (see the critique in Teichler, 2010).

There was an intensive debate within CHER in 1988 and 1989 whether CHER should be an exclusively European or world-wide network. Actually, the majority of persons involved in the process of foundation and consolidation of CHER were not in favour of the establishment of a European club. But they wanted CHER to help strengthening the identity of higher education researchers in Europe on the way to a genuine world-wide community of higher education researchers. The report on the first year of CHER formulates the spatial self-understanding of CHER as follows: “CHER brings together researchers from Western European countries. This allows cooperation based on a certain degree of common interests, similar socio-economic contexts and some common conditions under which research into higher education is undertaken. However, CHER establishes contacts and invites scholars from other regions to its activities as well.” The minutes of the CHER business meeting of 1989 report that an official decision was made regarding this issue according to which “... CHER is primarily a European research group ...” The report of the business meeting of 1991 states as regards membership: “Members from outside Europe are eligible provided they have research interests on Europe.”

Practically, the discussion about a European focus lost momentum soon as far as institutional arrangements were concerned. It was taken for granted that themes interesting for European scholars played a substantial role, but that scholars from all over the world would be welcome. In the official CHER constitution enacted in 1993, the objectives were formulated without any spatial reference. The only significant reference to Europe is the aim to hold the regular conferences in Europe (“organization and holding of international forum in Europe”).

The author of this article asked Burton Clark – the U.S. higher education researcher widely accepted in Europe as the nestor of higher education research – in 1998 whether CHER should move now, a decade after its establishment from a Europe-based to a genuinely world-wide association of higher education researchers. Burton Clark responded: The strength of CHER is that it is Europe-based and international. It would lose its strength if the strong embedment in Europe fades away.

Actually, CHER remained Europe-based and open beyond. The institutional basis was European all the time, while the membership and theoretical and thematic discourse was open beyond territorial limits.

The European institutional basis is visible in the locations of the annual conferences. All 25 conferences from 1988 to 2012 were held in Europe: Three each in Germany and the Netherlands, two each in Finland, France, Italy, Norway, Portugal and the United Kingdom, and one each in Austria, Belgium, Iceland, Ireland, Serbia, Spain and Sweden. All six chairpersons in the history of CHER were Europeans: Ulrich Teichler (Germany), Guy Neave (United Kingdom), Jean-Claude Eicher (France), Oliver Fulton (United Kingdom), Alberto Amaral (Portugal) and Christine Musselin (France). The CHER secretariat was located either at the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) of the Twente University (the Netherlands) or at the above named centre in Kassel (Germany), whereby Frans van Vught (the Netherlands), Peter Maassen (ther Netherlands), Jürgen Enders (initially Germany, subsequently the Netherlands und now United Kingdom) and Barbara Kehm (Germany) served as secretaries. Among the seven elected members of the board, always five or six were from Europe and one or two from beyond, mostly from the U.S. and Australia.

More precisely, CHER started off as a Western Europe-based association. Most key documents of the founding phase of CHER refer to “Europe,” but the initial invitation to form CHER quoted above talks about “Western Europe.” At that time, Western European scholars hardly took note of the development of higher education research in the Eastern regions of Europe except through the joint activities of the European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES) in Bucharest and its publications, notably the Journal “Higher Education in Europe” published since 1976 in English, French and Russian.

There were three participants from Central and Eastern Europe at the founding meeting of CHER. However, attention to issues of interest beyond Western Europe was paid for the first time in 1990: The third CHER conference focussed on the transition of higher education in Central and Eastern Europe. Some scholars from Eastern Europe became active in CHER thereafter. But only in 2012, the CHER-meeting in Belgrade (Serbia) and the post-CHER conference in Ljubljana (Slovenia) indicated that a real Europe-wide networking of higher education researchers is almost realized.

The openness of CHER beyond Europe is visible in the membership and the involvement in the various activities. The themes of the meetings, as a rule, were not geographically confined. The strong emphasis on comparative analysis contributed to an interest beyond the locations of the majority of members.

One has to point out, however, that CHER aimed at being a network in economically advanced countries. Issues of higher education in developing or middle-income countries never played a visible role.

THE PRIOR SCENE OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

The substantive objectives of CHER in the initial phase reflected the state of higher education research, its potentials and limitations of that time. A short glance at higher education research from the 1960s to the 1990s might help to understand the strategic options pursued in the first decade of CHER.

Research on higher education had some visibility here and there already in the 1960s. The economists of education became known around 1960, when OECD activities put an emphasis on higher education and the economy. In the U.S., already sizeable activities of higher education research developed at that time. The Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE), a UK-based association with substantial international activities, was already founded in 1964. The UNESCO commissioned the first world-wide trend report on higher education research at that time which showed enormous activities in some countries and also that higher education research altogether worldwide had remained a marginal and scattered field (Nitsch & Weller, 1970-1973).

Around 1970, both, the rapid expansion of student enrolment as well as world-wide student protests triggered off debates about the needs to reform higher education. The most visible effect as regards research on higher education was the establishment of many centres for teaching and learning, higher education didactics, staff development, etc., often both in charge of service and research, in various European countries. Moreover, many individual scholars in related disciplines – education, psychology, sociology, political science, law, economics and business studies, history, etc. – embarked in analysis of higher education issues. Some countries established separate state-supported higher education research institutes. However, the establishment of sizeable units for higher education research at universities remained an exception within Europe.

During the 1970s, two European associations were formed bringing together persons both interested in higher education research and in higher education policy and practice: The European Association for Research and Development in Higher Education (EARDHE) with an emphasis on teaching and learning (see for example Ritter 1985) and the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) with an emphasis on management and institutional development (see Begg, 2003).

When Burton R. Clark invited leading scholars in the early 1980s to provide an account of the state of higher education research worldwide, he certainly presented the worldwide notion of the state of higher education research well in inviting a majority of persons from the United States of America. Additionally, he chose five speakers from Europe, among them four from the United Kingdom – Tony Becher, Maurice Kogan, Harold Perkin and Gareth Williams – and a single one from continental Europe – Ladislav Cerych (see Clark, 1984).

Thereafter, higher education researchers began to be aware of the fact that the world scene of higher education research was not just comprised by the U.S. and a few Anglo-Saxon countries, but widely spread across the world, with substantial numbers notably in China and in the former Soviet Union, but small numbers at least in many economically advanced countries (see Sadlak & Altbach, 1997;

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Teichler & Sadlak, 2000; Altbach & Engberg, 2000; Altbach, Bozeman, Janashia, & Rumbley, 2006).

According to the name index of the Encyclopedia of Higher Education published in 1992 (Clark & Neave, 1992), eight European scholars were among the 18 most frequently cited ones: Guy Neave, Maurice Kogan, Ulrich Teichler (Germany), Tony Becher, Gareth Williams, George Psacharopoulos (Greece), Mark Blaug and Frans van Vught (the Netherlands) – i.e. five from the United Kingdom and three from other European countries.

In the 1960s, no international academic journals existed at all that were specialized on higher education. In 1972, Higher Education was established – a research journal covering the whole range of higher education research that continues to be the most visible journal of higher education research. For many years, more than half of the authors were from the United States, United Kingdom and Australia in this journal published in the Netherlands – the names of the publishers changed due to various acquisitions and mergers, currently it is published by Springer. The increasing visibility of researchers from a broad range of European countries can be demonstrated by the following facts: The proportion of authors from the United Kingdom decreased from 21% in 1993-1997 to 12% in 2001-2004 – there was an increase of the absolute number though, because the number of articles published annually increased even more substantially. It is striking to note that proportion of authors from other European countries even increased during that period from 13% to 29% – among them about one third each from the Netherlands, the Nordic countries and other European countries (see Teichler, 2005, p. 464).

The number of additional major international journals on higher education published in Europe grew since the 1970s: Studies in Higher Education (since 1976), established by the UK-based Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE); Higher Education in Europe (1976-2009), published by the European Centre for Higher Education (CEPES/UNESCO); Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management (1978-2012), established by the OECD; Higher Education (since 1988), established by the International Association of Universities (IAU); Tertiary Education and Management (since 1995), established by EAIR; and eventually European Journal of Higher Education (since 2010), a journal newly established when Higher Education in Europe ceased to exist. Only about half of these journals were already in place, when CHER was founded. It is indicative for the situation of higher education research that only two of these journals can be viewed as explicit research journals, i.e. Higher Education and Studies in Higher Education, while all the others are journals that publish both research and other expert studies and reflections.

THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING AND MEMBERSHIP ENVISAGED

Prior to the foundation of CHER, those envisaging a regular cooperation for the purpose of enhancing higher education research in Europe and possibly beyond formulated very moderate institutional objectives. In the letter of invitation for

what eventually became CHER, the three authors referred to the institutional basis only by formulating questions? “Should a working group of scholars and research units currently active in the higher education field be set up? Can we agree on establishing a series of symposia and, eventually, publications on current issues, research approaches and findings in specific areas? Could we envisage the possibility of creating a small group – say two or three persons whose task it would be to prepare a conference on a given topic?”

The organizers of the 1988 conference suggested in the invitation for the conference to consider future collaboration, but refrained from hinting any concrete means of collaboration: “... the symposium will provide an excellent opportunity to discuss future collaboration between European scholars in this area. With the latter consideration in mind, an invitation will be made to ... individuals who, it is felt, might contribute constructively to laying down the bases for significant collaboration in the future. It is hoped that by the end of the meeting it will have proved possible to move in an operational manner towards a more precise form of working together that is research based, as well as the means by which it may be realized.”

While CHER seems to have been very strategic and targeted from the beginning substantially in aiming for improved collaboration and enhanced professional identity of higher education researchers with ambitions as regards academic quality and comparative understanding, CHER was not committed at the outset to any institutional setting and to clear profiles of members. This was due to the fact that the initiators of CHER preferred the establishment of a loose and open network and “organization light.” This reflected the fact that the institutional basis of higher education research was very feeble in most countries and that the scholars interested in higher education as a field of research were very heterogeneous (see Teichler, 1996; Schwarz & Teichler, 2000).

Actually, the discussions and decisions regarding the institutional setting focussed over the first years on the following issues:

1. Should there be both institutional and individual memberships of CHER?
2. Should CHER be just a loose network or should it develop formal structures, if the latter was opted for, what kind of formal structures?
3. What should be the regular joint activities of CHER beyond holding an annual conference?

In the report on the first year (1988/1989), CHER was called “a network of both research groups and also individuals.” A steering group of seven persons and a secretary (actually, the respective organizer of the preceding annual conference) were named as the only organizational features. The report of the second year (1989/90) stated that CHER had 142 members, but that “membership procedures” still have to be established. According to the report of the third year (1990/91) a “registry of the adherents of CHER” was made following the decisions made at the CHER 1990 business meeting. In the report of the fourth year (1991/92), it was stated that “CHER has shifted from institutional membership to individual membership”; this indicates the informal institutional character of CHER at that

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time, as it contradicts the earlier statement of a network of “both research groups and also individuals” and as the system of membership fees and the annual CHER directories available since 1991 only took individual membership for granted.

Finally, a constitution of CHER was deliberated at the business meeting in 1992. It was agreed that CHER should be established officially under Dutch law, i.e. in the country of the location of the secretariat at that time. There were two models under discussion: Whether CHER would become a “society” or a “foundation.” Between 1992 and 1993, the majority of members opted for the foundation model, and CHER was institutionalized formally as “Foundation CHER” as a “continuation of the organization existing since ...” (26 November 1988). The foundation model officially concentrated all formal powers into a “board of governors” consisting of seven persons while the members officially were named “participants”; for example, change of memberships of the board officially was not decided by members present at business meetings, but rather “the board of governors shall fill its vacancies among themselves,” whereby candidates could be named in the business meeting. Practically, however, the members’ votes made in business meetings were treated as binding.

Actually, CHER became – not legally, but de facto – a membership organisation where all the key decisions are made in the annual business meetings by the members (legally called “participants” since 1993). Chairpersons and secretaries often played a strong role. This was taken for granted, for example, when Ulrich Teichler was chosen as the chairperson for the period from 1992 to 1998, when a pluri-annual election system of the chairperson substituted the initial custom that the coordinator of the annual meeting would be the chair for the subsequent year. The group of seven members of the “steering group” (initially) and “governors” (since 1993) continued to be elected in the business meetings for a few years and deliberated all CHER issues occasionally and prior to business meetings.

And CHER continued to remain a relatively loose network of persons. The annual meetings emphasized more a style of a group of friends or a club than an association. The local organisers of the annual conferences had enormous leeway in shaping the organisation and the substance; they were expected to be organisationally efficient and to be financially generous – conference fees were kept low.

Actually, CHER did not pursue a policy of winning as many members as possible and raising the participation of annual conferences as high as possible. Rather, CHER wanted to be a network of scholars with a similar sense of identity, i.e. a sense of being higher education researchers, and wanted to reinforce such a sense of identity. It certainly encouraged persons to be members and to be active in such a network who address higher education in their research activities as the prime thematic area, who have an interest in theory-enhancement of higher education research and who are interested in international comparison. CHER published in its directory an “admission form” in which it was pointed out that active researchers and students were welcome and in which possible members were asked to provide information about their research interest. In fact, persons who

could not be considered as researchers even according to wide criteria were denied membership.

The membership directories published annually in the early years and later every few years comprised a profile of institutional background, research interests and recent activities, other functions, and a list of recent major publications. On the basis of the directory for 2004/2005, the author of this article estimates that about half of the CHER members had a professorial rank (full professor, associate professors, etc.). Half of them were officially assigned to higher education as their field of research, while the other half of the CHER members in a professor rank had a broader definition of their academic area and undertook higher education research as part of their research work. The latter type of profile was more widely spread among European members than among those from other regions.

Most of the non-professorial members of CHER were scholars in advanced ranks of academic careers. Only few members were doctoral candidates or otherwise early career researchers. The composition of members was reinforced by the style of the annual conferences in the early years of CHER: ample room was given to plenary presentations where senior scholars covered a broad range of the theoretical and the thematic spectrum. This was helpful for ensuring impulses to the overall quality of the research field, but provided few opportunities for young researchers to present their initial or early career academic achievements to a broader audience. In the meantime, however, CHER conferences have become more similar to the mainstream of academic conferences with a few keynotes and a few roundtables along a multitude of presentations on small slices of the field of knowledge, thus providing more chances for young researchers to be visible. In addition, the Early Career Higher Education Researchers Network (ECHER) was formed in 2012 aiming at taking care of the needs of these scholars.

After some debates about the possibility of both institutional and individual memberships, CHER became an association of individual members. Thus, it was natural not to address explicitly the situation of research institutes of higher education. However, research units actually were instrumental in the history of CHER to provide backbone for an association with a “light” organisational approach. Actually, sizeable research units on higher education have been rare in Europe when CHER was founded and remained rare up to the present. CHER as a network notably was supported by four units where a dozen or more scholars concentrate on higher education as a field of research: The International Centre for Higher Education Research of the University of Kassel (INCHER-Kassel) (Germany), the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies of the Twente University (CHEPS) in Enschede (the Netherlands), the Nordic Institute for Studies in Innovation, Research and Education (NIFU) in Oslo (Norway), and the Centre for Research in Higher Education Policies of the University of Porto (CIPES) (Portugal). Otherwise, membership was widely dispersed institutionally.

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ACTIVITIES BEYOND THE ANNUAL CONFERENCES

Similarly as regards institutional setting and membership, CHER was not highly strategic from the outset as regards activities to be undertaken jointly beyond the annual conferences. In the letter of invitation to found a network of higher education sent out in 1988 prior to the first conference, only the idea was named of possibly preparing “publication on current issues, research approaches and findings in specific areas.”

In a text formulated at the end of 1988 which served to make CHER known, the annual symposium was named as the key activity. Beyond that, only possible options were named: “It is possible that at its annual meeting which would be linked to the symposium it might be decided to extend the range of its activities. Among such ventures for example might be joint collaborative and comparative studies undertaken by its members. The sponsoring of publications of state of the art reviews and on research findings in various fields, etc. are also envisaged.”

In addition, the CHER members agreed in the first meeting to establish contacts both with other associations promoting the discourse on higher education as well as international organisations active in Europe in the domain of higher education. This was reinforced in the second meeting. Actually, CHER addressed a number of associations and bodies and received friendly reactions expressing interest of cooperation from the International Association of Universities (IAU), the European Rectors Conference (CRE), the Council of Europe and UNESCO/CEPES as well as by the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) and the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE). The foundation of CHER and its programme was made public by the European Journal of Education in its 1/1989 issue as well as by the CRE journal. Actually, CHER did not pursue these activities further. The more CHER became a well-established network, the more functioning informal communication with all these associations and policy bodies was taken for granted; no need was felt to pursue formal contacts anymore. For example, a mix of rivalry and sense of good mutual cooperation prevailed in the relationships between CHER and EAIR; the latter was expressed by EAIR in inviting two of the founders of CHER to be presidents of EAIR from 1998-2002 (Ulrich Teichler) and 2002-2004 (Guy Neave).

Actually, the official publication activities of CHER remained confined to the major contributions of the annual conferences. These were published in special issues of journals (European Journal of Education, Higher Education in Europe, Higher Education and Higher Education Policy) in the early years, in occasional books (Brennan, Kogan, & Teichler, 1995; Schwarz & Teichler, 2000) and recently in the book series “Higher Education Research in the 21st Century Series” at Sense Publishers (see Clancy & Dill, 2009; Rostan & Vaira, 2001; Dill & Texeira, 2011; Vukasovic et al., 2012). CHER, however, did not embark on any other publication activities.

Various proposals were made initially to set up collaborative research projects. Actually, communication among CHER members turned out to be a fruitful basis

for collaborative research projects, but CHER itself never took officially the lead for such projects.

There was only a single major activity beyond the annual conferences and related publications for which CHER became the official actor. CHER agreed in 1990 to promote the training of young higher education researchers. Coordinated by CHEPS, the European Higher Education Advanced Training Course (EHEATC) was offered in 1992 and 1993 for about 12-15 participants with 8 weekly modules in different European countries (see Kehm, 2000). This course was seen as a success in quality and impact on the subsequent careers of participants, but a continuation of this model did not work out because it was not financially viable without substantial support as received in 1992 and 1993 in the framework of TEMPUS (cf. the respective chapter in this book).

The small range of official CHER activities beyond annual meetings and related publications cannot be viewed to be a failure of grand intentions. It became clear in the respective discussions in the early years that CHER was very successful in stimulating ties and activities informally. But when official CHER activities were discussed, this created a sense of rivalry and conflict about who would be visible and included and who would not be included. Eventually, CHER confined itself to be an informal basis, but not the official carrier of collaborative work among higher education researchers. CHER, thus, only facilitated the establishment of such projects through its networking approach.

In retrospect, scholars involved in CHER are convinced that the quantitative expansion and the improvement of quality of higher education research in many countries have been assisted by CHER. Major research projects, for example those funded by the European Union on higher education and employment and on internationalisation policies in higher education, certainly were facilitated by the close communication of higher education researchers within CHER. Or another example: When the European Science Foundation (ESF) in 2009 selected five out of 23 research consortia applying for research funds in the framework of the support programme “Higher Education and Social Change in Europe (EuroHESC),” four consortia were included who had been made up by scholars active in CHER.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) was founded with the intention of improving communication among higher education research across borders in order to improve the quality of higher education research, to stimulate comparative analyses, to facilitate research collaboration and to strengthen the sense of identity of higher education researchers. This intention was never lost and proved to be successful to a substantial extent.

The aim from the outset was to form a European-based network of scholars, first, in terms of strengthening the ties between scholars from countries where higher education research was felt to be in its infancy, was institutionally weak and dispersed, and had only small communities within each country. Second, CHER

intended also to address themes and concepts that were of major interests for higher education research, e.g. the macro-social context of higher education and the development of higher education systems in relationship to governments.

From the beginning emphasis was placed on informality, “organization light” and communication among friends. Various institutional options were discussed, whereby CHER became de facto – widely ignoring official regulations – an individual membership organisation of mostly senior academics either focussing on higher education or having higher education as one of their main areas of research. Annual conferences and publications of its major contributions became the formally visible component of CHER. CHER officially gave up ideas of taking official responsibility for research projects, training courses and other publications. CHER members were convinced that they could have wider impact informally if they were not in charge of such activities formally.

In the framework of these intentions, CHER can be considered as having reached many of its aims. Higher education research has expanded in Europe and in some other regions of the world, and its theoretical and methodological quality seems to have improved. International visibility of higher education researchers from a multitude of countries has been enhanced. Comparative higher education research plays a substantially more important role now. However, we note that higher education policy and practice has become much more interesting during the recent two decades in some kind of systematic knowledge as a basis of practical decision-making. In this process, we note a by far more impressive spread of “evaluation,” “indicators,” “expertises,” “white papers,” commissioning of studies with detailed conditions, etc. than support of what really could be called higher education research. The pressure on higher education researchers seems to be enormous to acquire financial resources and to be visible by doing activities close to the main stream of such policy-dominated modes of information gathering and discourse as well as by concentrating on current policy paradigms. So, higher education research – certainly in Europe – in the way it is understood in CHER, remained a relatively small area of persons and institutions, and even they are very much under pressure to be visible as applied researchers, evaluators and consultants and often do not concentrate on making higher education research a respective academic profession in its own rights.

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