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## 5. HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH BETWEEN POLICY AND PRACTICE

### THE DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

Higher education research as an area of study is quite recent and it developed first in the U.S. and only later in Europe (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007). Massification of higher education and concerns about the quality of its provision has certainly contributed to this expansion, as higher education became a major financial and political issue (Tight, 2007; Scott, 1995; Teichler, 2007; Clark, 1973). Guy Neave considered “the mass university both generates and consumes information” (Neave, 2000, p. 72) while for Malcolm Tight “the study of higher education is, unsurprisingly, closely linked to the growth of higher education itself” (Tight, 2007, p. 235).

Burton Clark (1973, p. 4) argued that in the period before World War II the literature on higher education research consisted, mainly, of very important but isolated works. The literature included “broad statements in sociology and anthropology [and] offered an undifferentiated view of education of all levels and types as a means of cultural transmission, socialization, social control or social progress (Durkheim, 1922; Cooley, 1956; Ross, 1928; Ward, 1906).” Other works became also established as classics, although remaining equally quite isolated for decades. An example are Max Weber’s statements on “*Science as a Vocation*” and “*The Rationalization of Education and Training*,” in which he portrayed “the struggle of the ‘specialist’ type of man against the older type of cultivated man (Weber, 1936, p. 243), as basic to many educational problems” (Clark, 1973, p. 4).

Another example was 1918 Thorstein Veblen’s work, where he argued the application of business standards to measure the success or failure of academic inquiry was spoiling higher education by turning universities into little more than advanced technical schools (Veblen, 1954). Ten years later, George Counts published *The Social Composition of Boards of Education: A Study in the Social Control of Public Education* (Counts, 1927) dealing primarily with boards of primary and secondary schools, although he briefly compared them with college and university boards, confirming earlier findings that boards were dominated by business people. It was only almost twenty years later that Hubert Beck published *Men Who Control Our Universities* (Beck, 1947).

Another example presented by Burton Clark was Logan Wilson’s work on academics, published in 1942 as *The Academic Man: A Study in the Sociology of a Profession* (Wilson, 1942; Clark, 1973, p. 4). This work was also left in isolation

for almost a decade and a half, until the publication of *The Academic Marketplace* by Theodore Caplow and Reece McGee (1958).

Using Patricia Gumpert's terminology (2002), as suggested by Bruce Macfarlane and Barbara Grant, such early theorists can in many ways be classified as the '*forerunners of higher education research*' (2012, p. 621). They were followed by a new and more recent generation of researchers – to name just a few examples, it includes Burton Clark, Martin Trow, Roger Geiger, Maurice Kogan, Tony Becher, Guy Neave, Ulrich Teichler, Mary Henkel, Ronald Barnett. Using again Patricia Gumpert's terminology, they may be classified as '*pathfinders of higher education research*,' "They directly seek to create knowledge about the new field and seek its legitimization. Pathfinders help to establish a research field as a worthy subject of academic scrutiny" (Macfarlane & Grant, 2012, p. 621).

However, more recently, several masters programmes in the field of higher education were established in the UK, Germany, Norway and Portugal, either in isolation or as sub-areas of master's programmes in education, public policy or other areas (Brennan et al., 2008, p. 7), and doctoral programmes were established in Finland and Portugal. This development allowed the emergence of a new and somewhat different generation, the 'pathtakers':

They are able to select intellectual interests from the territory of higher education studies legitimized by the pathfinders and extend them into new areas. This new generation is more professionalized due to the growth of masters' and doctoral degrees in higher education. It includes a growing number of researchers based in academic or educational development centres, of higher education specialists more often located across social science faculties and women. (Macfarlane & Grant, 2012, p. 621)

#### DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE U.S. AND EUROPE

The earlier development of higher education research occurred in U.S. Burton Clark (1973) reported that "a sociology of education has emerged in the quarter-century after World War II" (1973: 2) addressing two major themes – inequality beyond secondary education and social-psychological impacts of colleges on students – and two minor themes – the academic profession and governance and organisation of higher education systems and their institutions. The first research centres were established in the late 1950s. The Center for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE) at the University of California, Berkeley and the Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education (CSHPE) at the University of Michigan (Ann Harbor) were both funded in 1957. The Institute of Higher Education was funded in 1964 at the University of Georgia (Amaral and Magalhães 2007).

In Europe, this development occurred later. It was in the late 1960s that some social science researchers in the UK and Sweden initiated work in the area of higher education, and in 1964 the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) was established in London. The SRHE aims to advance understanding of

higher education, especially through the insights, perspectives and knowledge offered by systematic research and scholarship, becoming the leading international society in the field, as to both the support and the dissemination of research (SHRE, 2013).

Brennan et al. (2008, p. 7) identified several steps in the development of European higher education research, such as, starting in the 1970s, “the growing public awareness of the interrelationships between education and economic growth, social mobility, student unrest and subsequent reform” and, more recently, the implementation of the Bologna and Lisbon processes.

Ulrich Teichler (1992) characterised research on higher education in Western European countries as being decentralised; very heterogeneous in its institutional basis, disciplines and links to the practice; paying stronger emphasis to macro approaches, rather than to institutional problems; and being performed in small size and fragile institutional locations (*ibid.*, pp. 39-40).

Assuming the quantitative expansion of higher education was the main propulsion force promoting the strengthening of higher education research we can say this research field echoed the problems raised by the growth paths of the higher education systems, at least in Western European countries. After the middle of the XXth century, the expansion has become essentially quantitative and the political management of resources appeared as the main issue. A macro research drive was added, focusing on the problems raised by the mass assault to the ivory tower, i.e., research on the systems’ organization and its political steering, institutional reconfiguration and, last but not least, on equality of opportunities.

In Europe, the research on political, institutional and philosophical dimensions involved in the mass configuration of higher education, ranging from the decline of the donnish dominion (Halsey, 1995) to the meanings of mass higher education (Scott, 1995) and to the idea of higher education (Barnett, 1994), via research on processes and structures in higher education (Becher & Kogan, 1992; Becher, 1989) flourished in the United Kingdom.

The differences in the development of higher education research between the U.S. and Europe were not only temporal. In Europe there is a strict divide between micro-level research on teaching and learning and research on organisational, political and economic aspects of higher education, the latter being the core of higher education research in Europe, while in the U.S. research is apparently “more focused on studies of the student experience, and less on system-policy” (Tight, 2007, p. 245). This is consistent with Malcolm Tight’ findings, who analysing co-citations between higher education researchers identified two clusters when the categorisation of the key themes or issues in higher education research are considered. One centred around quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work and knowledge, the other around teaching and learning, course design, the student experience (Tight, 2008, p. 604).

Guy Neave (2008) added an additional difference considering “the incorporation of the comparative dimension into the study of higher education that sets the European version of higher education studies very much apart from its counterparts

in the United States, Latin America and Asia where long established single system perspectives tend still to dominate.”

Another important difference resides in the institutional setting of research. In the U.S. the development of higher education research has been closely integrated with graduate programmes on higher education addressing areas such as administration, leadership, organizational change, student services, etc. On the contrary, in Europe there is a tradition of organising higher education research based predominantly on research centres not linked to graduate programmes, therefore lacking the stabilisation given by a teaching function of the field (Teichler 2000). It was only recently that some post-graduate programmes on higher education emerged (Brennan et al., 2008, p. 7). This has the disadvantage that research might be:

... tempted to polarize between disciplinary research that lacks field knowledge and practical relevance on the one hand and applied research which is unconsciously embedded in the prevailing norms of the other. (Teichler, 2000, p. 23)

#### THE BASIS OF RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Higher education research is frequently defined by its theme of analysis rather than by the disciplines that focus on it (Brenann et al., 2011). In spite of the fact that research on higher education has been developed by disciplines such as sociology, psychology, economics, history and law, and interdisciplinary fields such as public administration or organizational studies, neighbouring not only educational research, but also science and labour market research to mention only these, they did not achieve a stable place in the framework of the established knowledge and within the disciplinary bounds. This is probably the reason why research on higher education has a hybrid and flexible institutional basis, ranging from department based research to applied research units or institutes. As Altbach et al. recognised, “in part because higher education has no disciplinary base, it has never had a clear academic home” (2006, p. 2). Those disciplines feed higher education research in terms of concepts and methodologies. However, higher education research must “keep in touch with its varied disciplinary feeding grounds in order both to enhance its quality and to avoid being driven too much by thematic concerns and policy agendas” (Brennan et al., 2011, p. 7).

Ulrich Teichler defined higher education research as “a field of knowledge, study and research” (1992, p. 37). Later he added that higher education research is “closely intertwined with policy and practice” (2003, p. 171) and can be defined as a small field, as a theme-based and relatively fragmented field and as a field with an enormously varied institutional basis (Teichler, 2006).

Bruce Macfarlane and Barbara Grant consider “the study of higher education may be understood as a series of intersecting cognate fields rather than one that is discrete. The theoretical constructs on which higher education research relies tend to derive largely from scholars of sociology, psychology or philosophy” (2012, p.

621). And they added that the field has presented a bifurcation: “scholars have largely coalesced around policy-based studies or learning and teaching research. The lack of communication between these research communities may partly explain the challenge in establishing higher education as a coherent field” (2012, p. 622).

Sue Clegg (2012) argued research on higher education is a series of related research fields, not a single field as proposed by several authors (Wenger, 2011; Becher & Trowler, 2001; Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu, 1988; Archer, 2000). Malcolm Tight, similarly, considered higher education research not a single community of practice but, rather, a series of, somewhat overlapping, communities of practice (2004, p. 409), “each with, in Wenger’s terms (Wenger, 2000), their own senses of joint enterprise, mutuality and shared repertoire” (Tight, 2004, p. 398).

In a later paper Malcolm Tight made a co-citation analysis based on the concept of tribes (academic cultures) and the territories they occupy (disciplinary knowledge) developed by Becher (1989) and Becher and Trowler (2001). However, while Becher argued that faculty members of academic units “have relatively little mutuality of research interest” (1989, pp. 163-164), the concept of communities of practice implies joint enterprise, mutuality and a shared repertoire of communal resources (Tight, 2008). Using the alternative metaphor of tribes and territories Tight suggested:

... higher education research, as a developing field of study, could be conceived as a partially explored territory through which a variety of tribes transverse. Some of these tribes are discipline-based (e.g. economics, psychology, sociology), some are based within education or higher education departments or centres, and some are from academic development or teaching and learning units. However, few tribes or individuals appear to live full-time within the territory. (Tight, 2008, p. 596)

The sociologist of education Roger Dale (1986) identified three ‘projects’ in the study of education policy: the ‘social administration project,’ the ‘policy analysis project’ and the ‘social science project.’ The ‘social administration project’ aimed at improving the living conditions of the population, at social amelioration. Consequently, this approach was frequently focused on national policies and issues; it assumed an interventionist and prescriptive perspective and, by concentrating on ‘facts’ rather than on theories and interpretation of the welfare, it intended to delimit a ‘field’ and not adopting a disciplinary view. The ‘policy analysis project’ aimed “not in trying to change the content of the social policy in a particular direction, but in the search for ways of ensuring the efficient and effective delivery and implementation of social policies, irrespective of their content” (ibid., p. 58). Finally, there was the ‘social science project’ whose scope is not functional, i.e., “Social scientists are concerned with finding out how things work rather than putting them to work” (ibid., p. 61). Therefore, the goal of this project was to produce better explanatory theories rather than more efficient decision-making processes or more welfare. And, as Martin Trow has emphasised,

researchers, usually performing at universities and not in government agencies and/or business organisations, “operate at a high level of training and specialisation, which means that they tend to isolate a ‘slice’ of a problem area that can be more readily handled than more complicated global problems” (Trow, 1984, p. 5). In the same vein, against the isolation of higher education areas both with regard to social sciences and with regard to other political social areas, Roger Dale (2007) goes even further by critically referring as ‘higher educationism’ the research approaches that take higher education itself as an isolated field of study inducing it as a reified or fixed object of study.

We may also argue (Amaral & Magalhães, 2007) that research on higher education reflects three different rationales: the managerial, the consulting and the social sciences approaches. The first rationale, very present in international research organizations, has assumed management issues and goals, such as institutional performance, effectiveness, efficiency, etc., as privileged focus for research. The consulting approach was developed mainly in the framework of political advisors of Ministries of Education and presently also the European Commission, being the research goals mainly connected to implementation issues. The third approach, developed by social scientists, does not aim at ‘solving’ problems or ‘advising’ policy-makers and public officials responsible for policy implementation, but rather to find regularities, critical trends, let alone, contradictory perspectives observed when studying social objects. And when the research focus moved to the institutional level, these three approaches tended to mix.

Elaine El-Khawas (2000), following John Kingdon’s description (1984) of the policy process as composed of three mainly unrelated “streams” – problem, policy and political – identified three bases of higher education research by “regarding research, policy and practice as separated functional spheres” (El-Khawas, 2000, p. 46). The first basis (research) referred to higher education research with an institutional academic base, such as a chair, a department, a centre or institute; the second basis (policy) included policy research or information units linked to supra-institutional agencies, namely governments; the third basis (practice) included institutional research in the U.S., performed by some higher education units and linked to the management of higher education.

Ulrich Teichler (2000) considered that this type of classification was not restricted to the U.S. and mentioned the use in Western Europe of a classification proposed by Frackman (1997) based on the same three functional types although using a different terminology: “the national and system wide decision support, institutional research and institutional decision support, and research on higher education as reflexion” (Teichler, 2000, p. 18).

Ulrich Teichler (2000, p. 17) proposed that the institutional settings of higher education research can be described using five dimensions: the functional setting describing whether research takes place in a research unit, a research and teaching unit or a unit with a mixture of diverse functions (research, administration, services, etc.); the thematic setting describing if higher education is the only research theme or if other themes are considered or if research addresses the

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relationship of higher education with other areas (higher education and the labour market for instance); the application setting, i.e., pure research, applied research, etc.; the stakeholders: governments, university administration, students, employers, international organisations, etc.; and the modes of control, i.e., academic self-regulation, national agency, control by a board, etc.

#### HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND POLICY

Maurice Kogan and Mary Henkel (2000) referred to the ‘research – policy making – practice relationship. Policy is one of the bases of higher education research (Teichler, 2000) and aims mainly to enrich policy process through information, policy-driven interpretations and scenarios on higher education. Les Bell and Howard Stevenson (2006, p. 14) presented several definitions of policy such as “... aims or goals, or statements of what ought to happen” (Blakemore, 2003, p. 10), “which echoes a similar distinction identified by Harman (1984) between policies as statements of intent, and those that represent plans or programmes of work” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 14). Both Blakemore and Harman address policy as a product, a result while “Taylor et al. (1997) see policy as both product and process” (Bell & Stevenson, *ibid.*). Kogan, in his study of policy making in education, refers to policies as ‘operational statements of values’ or the ‘authoritative allocation of values’ (Kogan, 1975, p. 55), “placing values at the centre of understanding policy” (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 15).

Ulrich Teichler (2000) explained that higher education research is in general based on a teaching and research unit at a university and should have a strong theoretical and methodological basis and, to some extent, should pursue knowledge for its own sake. In the case of policy, there are frequently, policy research or information units associated with supra-institutional agencies, such as governments and aiming at improving policy processes through information, reports, policy scenarios, etc.

Les Bell and Howard Stevenson listed three forms of policy studies in education:

1. The development of broad analytical models through which the policy process can be understood and interpreted.
2. Analysis of a range of policy issues.
3. Critiques of specific policies. (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, p. 2)

Ian Gordon et al. (1997) identified several forms of policy analysis in a continuum from *Analysis for Policy* to *Analysis of Policy*, including policy advocacy – where a particular conclusion is advocated, being offered as a recommendation; Information for policy – providing policy makers with information and advice, policy monitoring and evaluation – with emphasis on the impact of policy; analysis of policy determination – with emphasis on how policy developed as it did; and analysis of policy content – emphasis on understanding the origins, intentions and operation of specific policies and has more research interest than public impact (Bell & Stevenson, 2006, pp. 10-11).

Philip Altbach et al. (2006) emphasised the relevance of higher education research for policy makers:

Policy makers outside academic institutions, in government and in the private sector, who increasingly wield power over the future of academe, need knowledge and analysis in order to effectively coordinate complex institutions and systems. (Altbach et al., 2006, p. 2)

However, as Kogan informed, researchers and policy makers have very different tasks:

Social scientists are right to detect the ambiguities and the multiplicity of contests, impacts, values and structures ... Administrators cannot ignore those ambiguities but have to make a constructive use of them ... Whilst the social scientist has license to engage in the study of phenomena for its own sake, the creed of the administrator has to be 'I must act,' therefore I must think.' It is not the other way round (Kogan 1979, p. 8)

and Kogan and Henkel referred that "British policy-makers complained that they lacked the time and other resources to act as efficient receptors of commissioned research" (2000, p. 35), alerting that:

If research is bounded by criteria of demonstrated method and openness, policy-making and practice are related to criteria of relevance and in that pursuit will take account of Ordinary Knowledge. (Cohen & Lindbolm, 1979, as cited by Kogan & Henkel, 2000, p. 27)

Elaine El-Khawas (2000) discussed in detail the patterns of communication and mis-communication between research, policy and practice recognising that these worlds operated with "different purposes and modes of communication" (2000, p. 51), which frequently resulted in a "major disjunction" between them.

The field of higher education research has an important drive in the pressure for relevance, and its object-driven and interdisciplinary features are apparently enhanced by the need to act, to use Maurice Kogan's words (1979). Both the pressure for relevance and the other features relate to weaknesses and strengths of the field. The interdisciplinary approach to methodology, on the one hand, hinders the creation of a more consistent research community and, on the other hand, creates conditions for innovative and inventive research perspectives. Similarly, the pressure of relevance is linked to the increasing visibility of the field as its relevance is stressed, the weaknesses being linked to the increasing tendency to focus on micro issues and on "how to do?" questions. In comparative studies on higher education, it is also possible to identify at their root the need to respond to demands for providing policy makers with a basis for international comparisons, benchmarking, etc. This comparative trend in higher education research is visible not only in the activities of the research centres and their publications, but also in the reviews led by the World Bank (e.g. 1994, 2000, 2007, 2012) and Unesco (e.g. 1993, 2009).



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John Brennan listed problems resulting from the relationship between higher education research, power and interests (2011, p. 10). He reported a discussion with a senior officer where he presented different forms of policy research – development of policy, implementation of policy and evaluation of policy – and the senior officer ominously added a new category, that of questions that are too dangerous to ask. And in the discussion of the typology of research questions with other higher education researchers a fifth category was added, that of “those questions which are best asked towards the end of an academic career” (ibid.). For John Brennan “Where links to policy processes are involved, the researchers are likely to be affected by the policy outcomes. Thus, the potential for openly critical research may be limited” (ibid.) and he adds that “one of the contentions of the ESF Forward Look was that higher education research tended to be too much influenced by policy processes and too close to ‘power,’ whether in an institutional or a national policy context.” And Ulrich Teichler, in one of the CHER Conferences, with his very typical humour, argued that seeing academics debating the problems of higher education reminded him of a group of cows discussing the problems of the mad cow disease.

Neave also referred to problems of scholarly independence due to the expanding ‘consultancy nexus,’ “... part of that broader phenomenon which some are pleased to identify with the ‘post modern’ university, namely the blurring of operational and definitional boundaries around functions and fields of study once clearly demarcated” (Neave, 2000, p. 73). Guy Neave argued “the degree of scholarly independence which is the central, salient and identifying quality of a field of study as opposed to being one of the many commissioned functions and services that the Prince draws upon for his own ends” (2008, p. 267) For Guy Neave:

... consultants as the occasional servants of the Prince ... surf on well-established existing knowledge, sometimes even drawing on personal experiences as a tenuous Ersatz for the latest findings from the world of research. They do not deliberately set out to create new knowledge. Still less is their avowed purpose to inspire others to join together to form a sustainable and mutually sustaining community of discourse, discovery and mutual learning. (Neave, 2008, p. 267)

Higher education researchers, as researchers in general, need a sustainable financial situation. Due to lack of direct public funding support, they are frequently attracted to perform commissioned work, not only to governments and their agencies but also for the European Commission, which might condition their capacity to research new knowledge for its own sake.

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Practice is one of the bases of higher education research (Teichler, 2000) and corresponds mainly to research linked to the administration and management of higher educational institutions, as is the case with ‘institutional research’ in the U.S. (Teichler, 2006). There are also a number of organisations at international

level producing research with close links to practice, such as the European University Association (EUA), the Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and, at national level, we may count Rectors Conferences, universities and their faculties and departments.

Harland (2012) argued that higher education research is an open access area, with fluid cognitive borders, and identified seven different groups contributing to research in this field – education department researchers, research institute professionals, part-timers, disciplinary education researchers, disciplinary specialists, academic developers and administrators – to conclude:

... it appears that virtually anyone can do this work, perhaps needing only some prior research or writing skills. A background in the subject may be desirable but it is not required (Tight 2003), and so it is inevitable that higher education research sits at the bottom of the knowledge hierarchy of our institutions and society (Becher 1989). (Harland, 2012, p. 705)

Brennan et al. expressed a similar opinion, arguing:

the borderline between researchers and practitioners has become increasingly fluid through the involvement of various kinds of higher education professionals and administrators, of organisations such as rectors' associations, of scholars and students involved in higher education policy, of evaluation experts, and of management consultants. (Brennan et al., 2011, p. 8)

Bruce Macfarlane and Barbara Grant designated as 'amateurs' the part-timers identified by Harland. They are "those who are motivated to undertake higher education research by their love for the subject rather than by their training or profession" (2012, p. 623). However, there are other 'research amateurs,' such as international experts and consultants, undertaking higher education research by their professional work, rather than by their love for the subject. In general, the literature produced as result of research directly associated with practice very seldom contains explicit engagement with theory.

Another problem is the difficult communication between researchers and practitioners. Elaine El-Khawas (2000) argued there are frequent communication problems between the three spheres of higher education research (research, policy and practice), which are separate functional spheres. Indeed, the relationship of researchers with policy-makers and practitioners, representing two different cultures with different needs, different purposes and different communication styles, is not in general easy, being frequently afflicted with miscommunication problems.

In 2001 the American Council on Education organised a meeting between education policy analysts, education scholars, college and university presidents and foundation executives to explore the possibility of defining a common research agenda, "rewarding and exciting for researchers, sustainable and mission-driven for foundations, and applicable and relevant to practitioners" (American Council on

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Education, 2001, p. 2). It was meaningful that institutional leaders complained that research was not relevant, while researchers complained that good research results were not fully utilised. Therefore, it was no surprise that one of the conclusions of the meeting was:

Researchers tend to develop questions that come from historic strands of research based on existing conceptual models. Practitioners tend to ask questions that come from real life problems and contexts that do not fit into research models. Foundations tend to ask questions that reflect their values and missions. (American Council on Education, 2001, pp. 2-3)

The participants identified a number of barriers impeding better linkages between research and action/practice: firstly, a mismatch between academic (research) time and policy-maker time, with researchers needing longer time to develop their work and to conduct analysis and debates, and policy-makers and practitioners needing faster responses to meet their needs. Secondly, the reward systems of “promotion and tenure policies at colleges and universities” (ibid, p. 4) did not encourage higher education policy research. Thirdly, communication strategies of the results of research addressing practitioners and policy-makers were not effective.

#### THE ROLE OF RELEVANCE

An increasing demand for relevance of higher education was mentioned by Guy Neave, *a propos* of increasing pressures that higher education institutions deal with ‘matters that are the concern of the ordinary citizen,’ including “the duty of the university not merely to be ‘relevant; – and relevance, like treason, is largely a matter of dates – but to be seen to be relevant” (1995, p. 9). This quest for relevance had probably negative influence over the development of this new research area. Pressures for application and consultancy, although providing opportunities for higher education research, are not without danger and might promote ‘an application and consultancy drift’ of research (Teichler, 2000).

Maurice Kogan and Mary Henkel (2000) considered that research in higher education was still in a pre-paradigmatic phase, which allowed for inputs of functional research to the field. Ulrich Teichler recognised “the shaky institutional and financial basis for higher education research, due to the pressures of application and practical problem solving, leads the key researchers in the field to take over applied research and consultancy roles” (Teichler, 2000, p. 21).

For Ulrich Teichler dangers might include lowering theoretical and methodological standards to offer useful paradigmatic knowledge, following political fads or allowing the quest for relevance leading to subordination to the prevailing norms such as a tendency to “preach the gospel of managerialism and evaluative steering” (Teichler, 2000, p. 22). Policy makers are looking for ‘useful knowledge,’ meaning knowledge that provides solutions for actual problems, which is more compatible with positivist modes of research (Kogan & Henkel, 2000). However, “the research most highly prized by academics assumes that all questions are open and are likely to remain so after the research is completed”

(ibid, p. 39), which might explain that policy makers “may favour knowledge created by inspectors, auditors and consultants who start with the premises of policy makers” (ibid., p. 39).

One of the major weaknesses brought by the relevance hegemony and the practical drift in higher education research is that it can become an obstacle to the construction of broad and explanatory theory or theories. Although higher education research has managed to build up a sizable literature and important research networks,

Yet, the field has no widely accepted theories. Policy makers and administrators often say that they do not find research produced by the research community directly applicable to ‘practical’ problems of higher education management. (Altbach et al., 2006, p. 5)

#### CONCLUSIONS

Malcolm Tight (2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, 2011, 2012a, 2012b) has dedicated considerable attention to the analysis of higher education research articles. In 2004, Malcolm Tight analysed a database with 406 articles published in 2000 in 17 specialist higher education journals (2004: 395), concluding:

Higher education researchers, for the most part, do not appear to feel the need to make their theoretical perspectives explicit, or to engage in a broader sense in theoretical debate. (Tight, 2004, p. 409)

And he added that when they do so, their theoretical perspectives “tend to be based more often in social science disciplines or academic development units, rather than education departments or higher education research centres” (2004: 409). Later, Malcolm Tight, after comparing the articles published in 15 specialist academic journals in the years 2000 and 2012 concluded:

... the increase in the volume of high quality higher education research being published in journals based outside of North America is striking. Second, the increasing international orientation of the leading higher education journals, outside North America and, to a lesser extent, Australasia, is suggestive of a body of researchers increasingly talking to each other across frontiers. (Tight, 2012b, pp. 739-740)

However, in spite of this growth, the field is far from being stable, or clearly defined as a knowledge field and probably it never will. Due to its late development, research on higher education is probably still in the first phase of discipline development (Van den Daele, Krohn, & Weingart, 1977). For Maurice Kogan and Mary Henkel “higher education research may generally be assumed to be at a pre-paradigmatic stage if, indeed, it is ever likely to create paradigms” (Kogan & Henkel, 2000, pp. 29-30).

While some considered that “higher education has legitimised itself as a research area within educational studies, gaining acceptance among those who are

responsible for the leadership of higher education” (Altbach et al., 2006, p. 20), others argued “... there is a need for more theoretical engagement so that the field (or community of practice) can develop further, and gain more credibility and respect” (Tight, 2004, p. 409). And Marcia Devlin considered higher education is “a field of professional practice and a field of enquiry, not a discipline” (2008, p. 1), at least not a mature discipline, as following Tim May’s arguments, higher education research still lacks “The idea of theory, or the ability to explain and understand the findings of research within a conceptual framework that makes ‘sense’ of the data, is the mark of a mature discipline whose aim is the systematic study of particular phenomena” (May, 1997, p. 28).

Indeed, the combined effects of the pressure for increased research relevance, the likely increase of the application and consultancy drift and the strong dependence on commissioned research to ensure financial sustainability are strong barriers to the development of the area of higher education research. John Brennan argued the agenda of higher education research is very much influenced by policy agendas, in general short term and context bound and he adds that “currently, a lot of higher education research tends to be a mixture of some ‘grand narratives’ (for example, ‘knowledge society,’ globalisation’) and what Ball has described as ‘empirical analysis’ or ‘political arithmetic,’ i.e., largely quantitative studies shaped by pressing policy concerns (Ball, 2004)” (Brennan 2011, p. 11).

The presence in the field of ‘amateurs,’ practitioners, policy makers, consultants, in general publishing articles without strong theoretical or methodological support and the very open access nature of higher education research, with fluid cognitive borders (Harland, 2012) are additional barriers to moving beyond a pre-paradigmatic phase. Malcolm Tight argued further that higher education is a series of somewhat overlapping communities of practice, some communities of engaging explicitly with theory while other communities fail to do so, or they do so only implicitly. “So some higher education research communities are relatively a-theoretical, while others (the minority, but a significant minority) are highly theorised” (2004, p. 409).

Any effort to give a unified and complete general view of the research in higher education from an international perspective is doomed to failure. Not only because the field is object-driven and multi and trans-disciplinary, but also due to its youth and institutional location. Its youth makes difficult the availability of this type of studies to policy-makers and practitioners, and even more so to the general public, as literature search systems lack categories for the field (Teichler, 1994). Its institutional location, ranging from departments to newly created centres, let alone the language divide in the European context, is far from being well established. Curiously enough, what seems to be consolidating is a diversified pattern with regard to disciplinary bases and institutional location.

Ulrich Teichler (2000) presented several recommendations to overcome the problem of counterbalancing the drifts, pressures and biases impinging on higher education research. Ulrich Teichler (2000) recommended that higher education researchers should engage in “meta-research and continuous reflection on its conditions” and to “embark more systematically on a critique of research” might

help challenging “the national idiosyncrasies of public debates and research traditions” (2000, p. 23). And Malcolm Tight has proposed:

... for higher education research to so develop, it needs to recognise itself, and be recognised, as an interdisciplinary field in which multiple communities of practice operate... [it requires] for those with a major involvement in higher education research to engage with different disciplinary perspectives, and for the field as a whole to find more effective means of bringing researchers from these perspectives together (Tight 2004: 410).

Elaine El-Khawas (2000) and the American Council on Education (2001) reflected on barriers between higher education researchers, policy makers and practitioners. El-Khawas recommended that researchers should contribute to improved communication by paying attention to the best modes of delivery, paying attention to the audience by taking the time “to hear the concerns of policy makers and to learn about the constraints they face” (ibid., p. 55) and by accepting the random aspects of policy formulation. And in the U.S. we listed the efforts of the American Council on Education to increase communication between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners while Stanford’s National Center for Postsecondary Improvement (NPCI, 2002) proposed a research agenda for American higher education. In Europe, the new governance being implemented at the level of the European Union, with its extensive use of pools of experts, may well contribute to an increasing demand for consultancy, while the European Science Foundation Project, *Higher Education Looking Forward: An agenda for Future Research* (Brennan et al., 2011) will give a contribution for further developing higher education research in Europe.

Therefore we might expect a further development of the field. However, despite this foreseeable development, it is unlikely, at least in the near future, that higher education research will cross the boundaries of the pre-paradigm phase into the phase of paradigm articulation. The combined efforts of the pressure for increased research relevance, the likely increase of the application and consultancy drift and the strong dependence on commissioned research to ensure financial sustainability are strong barriers to the development of the field.

The ‘sacrificial offering’ to relevance is also reflected in the institutional profile of higher education research centres and institutes. It is not that the social science project is homogeneous; it is not that it should pursue identical perspectives and issues, but that the field and the research agenda have been strongly pressured by both ideological and pragmatic forces. The pressures are organised around the increasing individualisation of citizens and educational opportunities – see, for instance, the relevance that ‘choice’ issues have assumed in the literature – and the urgent need to provide quality mass higher education in the name of economic development.

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