

The future of higher education and of higher education research

Higher education looking forward: an introduction

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A “forward look” at higher education

Higher education is increasingly finding itself the object of research. This partly reflects the economic importance attached to higher education in today’s “knowledge economies” but also its importance for social equity and mobility and for social cohesion and integration. The implications of expanded higher education and research systems have local and regional dimensions along with national and global ones, as well as shaping the lives of individual citizens. Higher education also attracts the attention of research because the object of its study is the institutional basis of all academic disciplines and the contribution of systematic knowledge to the future of society.

The growth of research interest in higher education is also partly a function of higher education’s enormous expansion in recent decades so that today its character and performance have large implications for all members of society, whether or not they engage directly with higher education. A lot of this research is driven by policy and practical concerns, often of a rather immediate nature. The research is conducted by quite a wide range of actors, inside and outside of higher education, reflecting different interests and backgrounds. For a whole range of contextual and organisational reasons, new research is not always fully informed by the results of previous research and research in one setting, for example a particular university or a particular nation state, is not always set within a wider comparative context. Many of the foci of higher education research—for example, the creation of knowledge societies, access and social equity, governance and evaluation, consumerism and marketisation—are also the foci of research and scholarship across the social sciences more broadly. But links between them are not always made.

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This growing societal importance of higher education was reflected in the decision of the European Science Foundation to fund a Forward Look¹ on higher education—hereafter referred to as *Higher Education Looking Forward* or *HELFF*. The aim of HELFF was to examine higher education and research within a wider context of social science research by relating it to more general conceptual frameworks of, for example, human capital theories; theories of power, inequality and social exclusion; theories of organisations; new public management etc. By so doing, it was hoped to begin to address some of the larger questions concerning the changing relationship between higher education and society and to develop research agendas that would be relevant both to researchers and to policy makers and practitioners. It sought to be relevant to the concerns of policy makers without being dominated by them. And it sought to contribute to current debates whilst taking a relatively long view of higher education's changing relationship to the rest of society.

Between the autumn of 2006 and the autumn of 2007, research literatures were reviewed and overview reports written on five interconnected themes:

- Higher education and the needs of the knowledge society
- Higher education and the achievement (or prevention) of equity and social justice
- Higher education and its communities: interconnections and interdependencies
- Steering and governance of higher education
- Differentiation and diversity of institutional forms.

Draft reports on the five themes were critiqued by groups of scholars at workshops in Kassel, Helsinki and Paris, at an interim conference in Brussels, in a dialogue with researchers from other fields and young higher education researchers at a European Science Foundation conference at Vadstena, Sweden, and finally at the project's final conference held in London at the end of October 2007. The aim was in large part to propose an agenda for future research on the changing relationship between higher education and society, to suggest that this agenda may be more deserving of the attention of researchers from a wider range of social science fields than it has typically received, and to remind future researchers—from whatever backgrounds they come—that there exists an existing body of theory and research on which future work should build.

This special issue of *Higher Education* draws on the results of this work with five articles based on the above themes and a concluding article which attempts to synthesise and to set out a future long-term agenda for research into higher education.² All of the articles reflect the overall aim of the HELFF project as being “to examine the research literature in terms of its underlying conceptual approaches and empirical findings across a number of selected sub-themes in order to derive a future research agenda that will address scientific questions of long term strategic concern to the future of higher education”.

The research field

For a long time, research on higher education in Europe was undertaken by only a few hundred persons. In trend reports on individual disciplines in the humanities and social

¹ The full title of the project was ‘Higher Education Beyond 2010: resolving conflicting economic and social expectations’. The European Science Foundation (ESF) was established in 1974 to create a common European platform for cross-border cooperation in all aspects of scientific research.

² The original full thematic reports and synthesis reports are available at the European Science Foundation website at www.esf.org/helf.

sciences, it was often treated as a sub-area of educational research probably comprising no more than 10% of the research in this broader field. Research on higher education began to receive greater scientific attention as an area of knowledge and relevance to policy and practice in its own right in European countries in the 1970s, largely as a consequence of the growing public awareness of the inter-relationships between education and economic growth, social mobility, student unrest and subsequent reform efforts in higher education. From the late 1980s onwards, research on higher education attracted interest in the wake of debates about the knowledge society, new modes of steering and management and increasing internationalisation. In the current framework of the Bologna and Lisbon processes, research on higher education is again receiving growing attention.

Though a relatively small field, research on higher education is expected to address a very broad range of the thematic areas. Attention is paid notably to:

- the quantitative-structural aspects of higher education systems (e.g. access and admission, patterns of institutions and programmes, student enrolment and flows, graduation and graduate employment);
- the knowledge aspects (e.g. developments of research and curricula, issues of quality and relevance, concepts and measurement of competences, job requirements of professional utilisation of knowledge);
- aspects of processes and persons (teaching and learning, research processes and organisation, students, the academic profession, emergence of higher education professions); and
- organisational aspects of higher education (steering and management, state and stakeholders, functions and powers of the academic professions within governance, institutional settings, costs and funding).

Research on higher education is defined by its theme of analysis. It draws from a broad range of disciplines, notably education, psychology, sociology, political sciences, economics and business studies, law and history. These disciplines feed higher education research conceptually and methodologically. A challenge for higher education research is to 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. On the other hand, creative theme-based research has the potential and the need often to transgress disciplinary perspectives.

Other disciplinary fields contribute to the knowledge base of higher education research, though often some of the themes which are addressed are positioned outside and cross-cut the various disciplinary areas. Additionally, since higher education addresses general features of teaching and learning, research and knowledge generation, it is dependent on co-operation with experts in all disciplines, whether or not they contribute directly to higher education research.

Higher education research generally lacks a stable institutional basis within higher education institutions. Unlike other areas of the humanities and social sciences, higher education research does not usually possess a link between research and teaching which can ensure continuity and provide a buffer which can help protect academic freedom. In some instances, scholars in various domains of the humanities and social sciences address issues of higher education on short-term projects or during a certain period of their academic life-course; and in some instances scholars of these disciplines devote their academic work to higher education over long periods.

The borderlines between research and other sources of expertise are more fluid in higher education than in other spheres. It is mirrored by the fact that only a few journals in the

area of higher education in Europe operating in a supra-national arena are strictly confined to higher education research (e.g. Higher Education, Studies in Higher Education), while a larger number cover contributions of higher education researchers alongside those of other actors and experts (e.g. Higher Education Policy, Journal of Higher Education Management and Policy, Higher Education in Europe, Tertiary Education and Management, European Journal of Education).

The variety of institutional settings and the fluid lines between research and practice offer ample opportunities for broadening the scope of higher education research and its practical relevance. But they also challenge higher education researchers to avoid losing themselves in daily concerns and practical expectations. Therefore, the reflective exercise of taking stock of past and current achievements and problems, of looking ahead to possible future research topics and areas for inquiry, and of designing research strategies for the future, might be more important for this area of research, being both blessed and endangered by somewhat unorthodox conditions and characteristics.

Research themes

The thematic reviews undertaken by the HELF project were intended to both summarise existing research and to set it within larger theoretical and policy perspectives. Links were attempted with social science research in related fields. And while the focus was upon higher education and society in Europe, the reviews drew where appropriate on relevant work undertaken in other developed societies. No claims are made for comprehensiveness in the resultant reports. Rather the aim has been to draw out and emphasise points of long-term significance and importance, both for future research and for policy and practice.

There is inevitably an element of arbitrariness in the selection of themes. Attention to more micro processes of teaching, learning and student assessment is generally lacking. Economic perspectives could have been given more weight. The decisions to draw on more sociological perspectives and to concentrate on the macro/meso levels of analysis were largely taken in order to achieve a degree of coherence in the whole and to reflect the overarching theme of higher education's changing relationship with society as a whole.

It is clear that there are many interconnections between the themes. Thus, institutional differentiation impacts directly on how higher education performs its role in relation to social equity. Many of the pressures on higher education to widen participation and provide avenues of social mobility are driven by, and have consequences for, the characteristics of the "knowledge society". Patterns of governance adapt to changing relationships between higher education and its communities and stakeholders. As well as interconnections between the themes, there are also clear connections to additional themes and research areas. Thus, investigation of the knowledge society takes us towards the field of science policy. Differentiation has implications for the professional roles of academics, their training and development.

At the HELF interim conference in Brussels, a number of cross-cutting issues emerged as general characteristics of the research field. These included the pervasiveness, on the one hand, of *grand narratives*—of globalisation, of knowledge society, of academic capitalism etc.—and, on the other hand, of quite localised, policy driven empirical research. Research—especially comparative research—which addressed the big themes posed by the grand narratives seemed to be quite rare. Global, regional, national and local levels of analysis appeared to be warranted and, where possible, to be combined.

While much research addressed higher education's responsiveness to external pressures and requirements, one could also identify a clear strand that addressed its capacity for resistance, if not downright subversion—*escaping governance* as one contribution put it. High hopes and aspirations were to be found in many national and international policy documents but research tended to point to complex and conflicted realities. Higher education was generally cast as a real or potential *hero* in contemporary society but examples were not difficult to find where higher education emerged more as the *villain*, variously legitimising social inequality, blocking off opportunities, failing to equip the workforce, failing to innovate or failing to take *truth to power*. That the various critiques reflected contradictory ideological positions and demands is a further characteristic of the field.

Public and private dichotomies were also much in evidence, not just in terms of the ownership and funding of higher education but in terms of its contribution to a larger and wider *public good* beyond the various private and positional advantages accruing to individuals, enterprises and nations. From such perspectives, intellectual property could be seen as the *hoarding of knowledge* and educational goals replaced by *credentialism*. Tensions of these and other sorts could sometimes appear to be creating a *legitimation crisis*.

Questions could also be raised about higher education's central processes. Who, within the knowledge society, was educating whom? Were calls for new forms of *engagement* and the *pursuit of relevance* likely to be the salvation or the destruction of higher education? Who were the *new higher education professionals*, some of whom apparently neither researched nor taught, at least not in recognisable ways?

Fragmentation, interest groups, mission overload could be identified in many places. A new cast of characters—consumers, users, producers, owners—could be identified with new sets of roles to play. Should one be talking about *higher education* or *university*, about *system* or *institution* or *autonomous professionals*? How did a greater institutional diversity map on to changing (and arguably growing) social diversity? Had the university's traditional claims to *exceptionalism* in its dealings with state and society all but gone in most jurisdictions? What today was the role of the state and was it generally benign or, if not actually malign, frequently indifferent or uncomprehending? What were the effects of structures, systems and ideology at all levels?

It was noted that higher education was frequently *in the news* these days. But were the boundaries between *public debate* and *expert discourse* always clear and did this matter anymore? A priori value judgements abounded on all sides of most debates. What was the relationship between the categories and concepts used in debate and analysis and the realities they purported to refer to? Were academics too self-interested to apply their various crafts to their own professional world? Was there a tendency towards fatalism in attitudes towards policy studies? Was there a danger in adopting too passive a view of the roles of higher education's various participants?

These and many other questions emerged in the preparation and discussion of the five thematic reports which are the basis of this issue of Higher Education. A senior British policy maker in higher education once referred to “the research questions that are too dangerous to ask” In posing a future research agenda, it may be that an element of danger can no longer be avoided!

Research into higher education is itself of course part of its own object of inquiry. The characteristics of research in the field, as in most others, reflect relationships between research and policy, the growth of interdisciplinary activity, the changing nature of the academic profession, the rise of *academic capitalism* and much else. There are, thus, many kinds of higher education research. It is hoped that this special issue of Higher Education

will make a useful contribution to future higher education research of all kinds. But it is hoped particularly that it will contribute to future research which is prepared to ask critical, difficult and sometimes even *dangerous* questions and which is willing to build on previous research and scholarship, both from the higher education research field itself and from the social sciences more generally.