



Making sense of *change* in higher education research: exploring the intersection of science and policy

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Accepted: 12 September 2022 / Published online: 5 October 2022
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Abstract

Higher education studies give considerable attention to understanding *change*. The interest in change reflects the historical conditions in which higher education emerged as a distinct field of study. Around the mid-twentieth century, a pragmatic need for an academic response to managing larger and more complex higher education institutions and systems was taking shape. This need gave rise to a tradition of studying change in higher education, which has continued into the present. To explore how higher education researchers have been grappling with the problem of change, we examine a selection of works published in this and other higher education outlets since the 1970s. We organize our exploration around three distinct yet interrelated lines of research: (a) change within *higher education institutions*, which in higher education studies are typically conceptualized as organizations; (b) change concerning *nation-states*, which are usually conceptualized as systems; and (c) *transnational* change, sometimes referred to also as global. Each line of research features the field's telltale dual orientation: (i) contributing to abstract knowledge through academic inquiry, on the one hand, and (ii) generating practical and actionable insights for decision makers, on the other. We find that the field's dual orientation shapes knowledge creation along each line of inquiry, yet with important variations. We propose more generally that higher education studies' ability to balance the two orientations is an important source of its legitimacy as a field of research.

Keywords Change · Higher education · Social science · Policy · Interdisciplinarity

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Introduction

In the opening paragraph of the chapter “Change” in his widely influential book, *The Higher Education System*, Burton R. Clark asks: “How can it be that the university, and indeed the higher education system at large, is sluggish, even heavily resistant to change, but somehow also produces virtually revolutionary change?” (Clark, 1983b, p. 182)¹. This paradox, as Clark referred to it, occupied many scholars of higher education, before and since. Time and again, scholars have asserted that academic organization is, on the one hand, notorious for being resilient when externally pressurized and, on the other, remarkably adaptive (Becher & Kogan, 1992; Clark, 1983a; Elton, 1981; Gumpert, 2000). Yet Clark considered this widely observed inconsistency to be only one among the many contradictions characterizing the dynamics of change in higher education. Change itself, he further observed, was “the most recalcitrant subject in the social sciences” and, by extension, then still young field of higher education studies was no exception (Clark, 1983b, p. 182). Be it due the presumed challenges of understanding change, the inherent contradictions, or perhaps the elusiveness of meaning, *change* has remained a problem of enduring empirical and theoretical interest in higher education studies until today.

Higher education scholars have been variously interested in how higher education changes. In pursuing this interest, they have focused on change in relation to virtually any aspect of higher education, including academic culture, organizational forms, national policies, student body, funding models, professional norms, and administrative practices, to name a few examples. Researchers give attention to change at different levels of analysis, from local to global, and scale, from micro to macro. In a recent systematic review on higher education as a field of research, Daenekindt and Huisman (2020) identified “organizational change” as one of the topics that form a cluster at the center of the field, together with a set of other topics, such as quality, leadership, and strategy. Closely related topics such as “system(ic) change” and “higher education reform” are also well-established areas of inquiry (e.g., Kyvik, 2004; Gornitzka et al., 2006; Curaj et al., 2012; de Boer et al., 2017). In a way, and echoing Clark’s words on the status of change as an object of research in the social sciences, change—be it for the purpose of documenting, analyzing, explaining, managing, or critiquing—animates a broad range of other research themes in higher education studies.

But where does this interest in change come from? What inspires it? And what does a sustained focus on change mean for higher education as a field of research? This article is motivated by these questions. In addressing them, we posit that knowledge creation is shaped both by epistemic and pragmatic concerns of the community that contributes to it (Krause, 2021). It involves empirically and theoretically oriented work, and frequently both as a part of a single research endeavor. We expect that the way scholars in the field of higher education studies approach their research tasks will be influenced by the field’s leaning on different social scientific disciplines *and* its proximity to policy, management, and practice in higher education. This interstitiality is, we contend, constitutive of the nature of knowledge herewith collectively produced. However, save for a handful of exceptions (most recently Hamann & Kosmützky, 2021), these aspects of knowledge creation in higher education studies have remained largely implicit and rarely examined in their own right. Therefore, in this article we explore how the research on change in higher education

¹ In the same year, Clark published the chapter also as an article in this journal, titled “The Contradictions of Change in Academic Systems” (Clark, 1983a).

has been shaped both by knowledge in other domains of social sciences, particularly in the disciplines, and by the developments in higher education as a social sector.

In the next section we look at the field of higher education studies and its historical entanglement in the research on change. We examine what we see as the field's *dual orientation* with respect to its aims, broadly speaking: (i) contributing to abstract knowledge through academic inquiry, on the one hand, and (ii) generating practical and actionable insights for decision makers, on the other. In the subsequent section we identify three lines of research on change, or sub-topics, each roughly corresponding to a level of analytical inquiry. Here we distinguish between (a) change within *higher education institutions*, which in higher education studies are usually conceptualized as organizations; (b) change concerning *nation-states*, which are conceptualized as systems; and (c) *transnational* change, sometimes referred to also as global. Within each line, we examine and discuss a selection of widely read works published in this and other higher education outlets since the 1970s and show the variety of ways in which higher education researchers have been grappling with the problem of change. We close the article with a discussion and suggestions for further research.

Higher education research between epistemic and pragmatic concerns

We posit that the field of higher education research is characterized by a *dual orientation*. This duality comes from the field lying at the intersection of two concerns: *epistemic* and *pragmatic*. The former means that the status of higher education studies as a legitimate field of research rests on its ability to contribute to more general understanding of phenomena in higher education and beyond. In simplified terms, higher education research is as good as it is useful to the scientific community, including the established disciplines. The latter means that the field's very existence, independent of the disciplines, rests on the notion that higher education is an established area of policy and practice. From this perspective, higher education research is as good as it is useful in addressing real-life higher education problems. The attention to the field's dual orientation is helpful to understand the emergence of its interest in change and the way this interest is sustained. To support this claim, in this section we explore the historical intricacies of this duality.

Higher education research is usually characterized as an interdisciplinary field of study (Brennan & Teichler, 2008; Macfarlane & Grant, 2012; Tight, 2012). Ulrich Teichler, and other scholars who have written extensively on the subject, argued that most of the phenomena under the broad theme of “higher education” are too complex and multifaceted to be analyzed from a single discipline (Teichler, 2013). As such, various disciplinary and methodological approaches are needed, including, pedagogy, sociology, history, political science, economics, and law. Higher education researchers have thus always leaned on the conceptual and theoretical work in social science disciplines and other interdisciplinary fields (Ashwin, 2012; Hamann & Kosmützky, 2021; Tight, 2004). Borrowing is, after all, one of the traits that higher education studies share with other fields that “sit” between major disciplines (e.g. Birkinshaw et al., 2014; Jarzabkowski et al., 2010). As a consequence, the field is influenced by trends and developments in the social sciences more generally.

One important caveat should, however, be kept in mind when discussing the field's boundaries. The research on higher education is also published extensively outside higher

education's specialized outlets, yet this research is not typically considered (or "counted," as it is the case in the recent review by Daenekindt & Huisman, 2020) as belonging to *the field*. Notwithstanding potential implications of such choices², in this article we are interested in the kind of research that has contributed to the "fielding" of higher education studies, that is, to making it a distinct field of study, partly separate yet not independent of the social science disciplines and other domains of knowledge production. In addition to the specialized journals, the field-like properties of higher education studies are seen in the national and international scholarly societies and their regular conferences, undergraduate and graduate programs, research centers, dedicated funding lines in the competitive grant schemes, and even academic titles in some countries (e.g., "Professor of Higher Education") (Altbach, 2014; Rumbley et al., 2014).

The status of higher education studies is, meanwhile, not uniformly acknowledged. For example, a recent survey of social scientists working in the USA found that higher education is seen as less scientific and rigorous than established disciplines such as economics, political science, psychology, and sociology (Grossmann, 2021, p. 13). This example attests to the importance of the epistemic dimension of the field's legitimacy, which appears best ensured through proximity and a continuous dialogue with the presumably more "scientific and rigorous" disciplines. And although the somewhat undefined and continuously shifting status of higher education studies in the organizational taxonomy of social sciences is acknowledged among the scholars in the field (Macfarlane, 2012), we know little about exactly which disciplines it leans on the most and how they exactly affect it. Similarly, we know little about whether or to what extent higher education studies have informed conversations in other domains, including the disciplines.

But higher education research is not influenced only by trends and developments in the disciplines. The development of the field, in fact, went hand in hand with the expansion of higher education as a social *sector* (Trow, 2007; see also the introduction to this special issue). During the field's early years (roughly, until the early 1970s), at its center were *higher education institutions* (HEIs)³, which were becoming objects of interest for empirical study and policy intervention (Neave, 2003). Administrators and policy makers were looking into ways of harnessing the developments in higher education research for practical purposes. As the number of universities, students and staff grew exponentially around the world (Cantwell et al., 2018; Frank & Meyer, 2007), higher education was becoming

² This discussion merits a separate study.

³ The term higher education institutions, or its acronym HEI, is ubiquitous in the academic literature, in white papers, and is even used by the media. While widely used, the term is not without problems. The term institution holds a set of specific, and debated, meanings in sociology, political science, and legal studies. For sociologists, whose use of the idea may be most relevant to the way it is used in higher education studies, an institution generally and broadly references "complex social forms that reproduce themselves" (Miller, 2019, p. 1). While individual universities are indeed complex and reproduce themselves, and can be called institutions, using the term for specific organizations as we do here and as is common in the literature can inspire confusion in distinguishing between organizational institutions that are specific concrete entities like the University of Buenos Aires and social institutions like higher education and academia. The University of Buenos Aires undoubtedly has its own complex and self-reproducing rules, norms, customs, and expectations that are characteristic of institutions, it also shares many of the rules, norms, customs, and expectations of the institution of higher education in Argentina, Latin America, Spanish language academic, and even higher education worldwide. This, we distinguish between the University of Buenos Aires as a *higher education institution*, or HEI, that we used to identify one or more specific universities, universities of applied science, or higher education colleges, and *higher education as an institution*, which is a more technical but generally applied term.

an object of increasing interest to national governments, international organizations, and social scientists. By the 1970s, the field of higher education studies was predicated on the idea that specialized knowledge about higher education was necessary to rationalize national policy and university administration (Dressel & Mayhew, 1974). As a sector of society and a social institution in its own right, higher education is recognized in the administrative setup of most countries, which usually have governmental offices dedicated to it, statistical categories, budget lines, and of course policies for the sector (Meyer et al., 2008; Stevens & Shibanova, 2021). This recognition extends to the supranational organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, UNESCO, and the European Union (Buckner, 2017; de Gayardon, 2022; Teichler & Sadlak, 2000). Therefore, it is difficult, if at all possible, to give a just account of the history of higher education as a field of research—and its sustained attention to change in particular—without considering the history of higher education as a societal sector, nationally as well as internationally.

The developments in the USA during the postwar period are a good illustration of how the systematic interest in change, and HEI change in particular, took shape.⁴ Growth and expansion of higher education called for a more systematic approach to the rapidly changing landscape, as well as for reimagining national higher education as a *system* of organizations of varying quality and performance (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021). Driven in part by the National Science Foundation's establishment of the social science program in the late 1950s, social sciences underwent a dramatic expansion, which lasted until the end of 1970s. Matched by generous federal and philanthropic funding, the increasingly more technocratic style of federal policy making has made way for the emergence of first large-scale policy-oriented social science research (Hutt, 2017; Solovey, 2001). With the growth and expansion of social sciences, scholars were increasingly more interested in both qualitative and quantitative aspects of academic work and its organizations, in their own disciplines, and beyond. It was in this context—and at the intersection of policy and science—that higher education emerged as an object of systematic research.

But the development of higher education studies, and the research on change therein, was also predicated on a set of material conditions, such as technological development. In the postwar decades, high-speed computers were becoming increasingly more used for social-scientific research. Combined with expanded capacities for large-scale data collection and not least available (financial) support for such projects, their widespread use led to a rapid development of statistical methodology. This effectively made recording and analyzing change in higher education over time and at scale possible in ways not seen before (Astin, 2003). These developments were also crucial for the interest of scholars in higher education and science studies in developing methods of systematically comparing performances of HEIs, which also emerged during this period (Wilbers & Brankovic, 2021). This type of knowledge would then supply managers and policy makers with increasingly more sought-after information about HEI performance.

The early issues of *Higher Education* are indicative of the field's sensitivity to both important policy themes at the time and developments in social theory beyond higher education. The

⁴ We note that the USA was not the only country in which higher education was an object of systematic research in the postwar decades (Neave, 2003), although it was a prime “exporter” of models or templates of change, which influenced scholarships on higher education in other regions. The “Western hegemony” of social science is established and re-produced by setting particular frames of reference from which future empirical findings and theorizing are based (Krause, 2016). Because our interest here is in teasing out the origins of the field's interest in change, we find the developments in the USA important to look at more closely.

journal's first-volume articles were a mix of system-level, national assessments of change in higher education, and particular applied studies and reviews on specific management practices. Among them were Dobbs' (1972) account of the shifts in UK science policy, which discussed the implications for organizing scientific research in UK universities. Making no explicit appeal to theory, Dobbs linked a change in the policy environment to changes within HEIs. In another article, Peterson (1972) devised a framework for university decision-making that called for the interaction of local organizational structure with environmental demands. Peterson drew on contingency theory emerging from management studies at the time and Herbert Simon's theory of administrative behavior. Also in the first volume of the journal, Weathersby and Balderston (1972) meditate on the implications of applying planning-programming-budgeting systems (PPBS), a management regime developed by defense contractors for administering the US nuclear armed defense bureaucracy. While they recognize the differences between universities and the US military, Weathersby and Balderston argue that HEIs and the military face a similar political environment marked by a "crisis" of public confidence and the need to build trust through improved management.

During the 1970s, theories of crisis animated much thinking about US higher education. Martin Trow, whose framework of classifying national higher education systems as elite, mass, and universal is one of the most influential conceptions in the field, also theorized on the consequences of change for traditional HEIs. In a 1970 essay published in *Daedalus*, Trow (1970) outlined his theory about how the quest for contemporary legitimacy and pressures to accommodate emergent social demands could imperil university autonomy. Trow worried especially about the social and political commitments expressed by students and junior faculty around him at the University of California. He feared that the mixing of scholarship and activism could both invite unwanted scrutiny from the state and weaken student and scholars' commitment to the disciplines and maintenance of academic culture. In many ways, the attention to threats and perils we see in Trow's essay has never left the field.

The perceived threat of a political and activist higher education reflects an assumption that HEIs are separate and not part of the state. Trow's perception of these changes evidently prompted him to document events and theorize their social and organizational consequences. Massification was both a social phenomenon and a process to be managed. Trow anticipated the "rationalization of university administration" (Trow, 1973, p. 15) as a predictable response to expanded enrollments. Trow's model for understanding social change as it related to higher education, and the underlying assumptions of separateness from the state and organizational independence, became a template for understanding HEI change beyond the US context. In part this was because Trow himself was a comparativist and in part also because organizations like the OECD took up and advanced Trow's ideas.

Early issues of *Change*, a US magazine founded in the late 1960s to provide insights to administrators and policy makers, show a preoccupation with managing and preserving higher education in what observers saw as a tumultuous and unprecedented environment. According to the authors contributing to the issues, two decades of growth and expansion following the second world war presented profound changes to be reckoned with (Trow, 1973). A theme that drew attention of early and influential higher education scholars in the USA, found in the early editions of the magazine, was the struggle between old and new, and what the struggle meant for the organization of higher education. In the first issue of *Change*, the USA-based historian of American politics and democracy Stephen Graubard wrote: "The debate today is not between professors and students so much as between those who have an older vision of what the university is intended to be and those who are seeking for a new definition" (Graubard, 1969, p. 28). For Graubard and others, preserving the

character of HEIs, then under pressure by new social demands and participants, was a civic imperative. Protecting higher education from the state, economic interests, and even students, was presented as a social good to be re-secured and ensured.

As our account and the historical examples suggest, the two orientations of the field of higher education research were very much intertwined in the field's early years. Thus, when considering the field of higher education research as a collective space, the need to produce (abstract) knowledge should not be treated as independent of the more practical concerns of rationalizing and managing higher education and its institutions under ever new circumstances. In the following section, we shift our focus to more recent developments in how scholars in the field have been grappling with the problem of change.

Producing knowledge to make sense of and manage change in higher education

In this section, we examine a selection of works that illustrate three broad lines of researching change in higher education, which we have identified as the most prominent: (a) change within *higher education institutions*, which in higher education studies are typically conceptualized as organizations; (b) change concerning *nation-states*, which are routinely conceptualized as higher education systems; and (c) *transnational* change, sometimes referred to also as global. Each line reveals how the field responds to developments in social sciences, adapts to the specificities of higher education as a societal sector, and reflects the expansion and geographic heterogeneity of the field.

We note that these lines of research are not discrete. In the literature they layer and intersect to form complex permutations. For simplicity's sake, we consider each independently and for limits of space, we only discuss a handful of studies at each level. We highlight individual studies not to establish them as definitive or authoritative, but as illustrative examples, many of which are well-cited and widely known in the field. We concentrate on works published by *Higher Education*, but we are not fully limited to the journal in our review. In addition to the empirical foci, we pay special attention to the scholars' engagement with theory and intellectual traditions in other areas of social sciences, given that we see both the empirical and theoretical work as key to the systematic knowledge creation in the field.

Change within higher education institutions

How HEIs change, given internal cultural and structural dynamics, and external “environmental” conditions is a basic problem with which higher education researchers have always grappled. Attention to academic cultures, identities, disciplinary differences, organizational politics, and management practices as drivers of organizational change has been long a recurring topic of research interest (e.g. Gouldner, 1957; Baldrige, 1971). Writing on the topic in his landmark book (1983b), Clark saw change in higher education more as an incremental process than real-time adaptation. Change, according to Clark, is shaped by work and authority structures in respective contexts, belief systems, and the power balance between the state authority, academic oligarchy, and the market. In studying these dynamics, scholars have combined approaches and insights from a range of disciplines, including general studies on professions, bureaucracies, and decision making.

Oili-Helena Ylijoki's (2000) study of teaching and learning in four disciplines at a Finnish university is among the influential studies in the genre published in this journal. By applying the Durkheimian concept of "moral order," developed in psychology, philosophy, and anthropology to theorize identity, Ylijoki sought to update Becher's (1994) anthropological and Clark's (1987) sociological concepts of disciplines. Disciplinary departments and degree programs, with their own habits and priorities, have long been assumed as the fundamental "building blocks" of HEIs (Clark, 1987). Ylijoki found that disciplinary departments at a university in Finland were moral orders that provide meaning about what is right and good to do. Moral orders establish what topics are taught, how they are taught and what the purpose of knowledge and learning is. Disciplinary cultures and values allow academic staff and students to interact. Ylijoki locates moral orders *within* teaching programs *within* universities. That is, the moral order is not of the discipline—not of computer science—or of a particular university, but of computer science within a particular university (see also Hermanowicz, 2005). Changes within a HEI, then, occur through a change in the moral order of constituting programs and units. The practical aspect of diagnosing moral orders is not lost on Ylijoki. When moral orders become oppressive or an obstacle to necessary organizational change, identification of, and reflection upon, they can facilitate change. By the same token, anchoring by a moral order allows HEIs, and subunits within them, to resist some forms of change.

Higher education research features an established strand of work that conceptualized change in HEI as a largely internal political process. One of the most influential examples of this work comes from Victor Baldrige, who conceptualized HEIs as complex organizations with diffuse decision making structures and multiple sources and centers of power (Baldrige, 1971). Baldrige's model, which was developed through the study of US research universities, sponsored by the US Office of Education (a predecessor of the Department of Education), holds that HEI change is the product of conflict, bargaining, and collusion politics that balances between sentimental demands and multiple, often conflicting, preferences among internal constituents. This example also serves as an illustration of the knowledge that resulted from the field's linkages with government structures and their respective interests.

The political model of HEI change is widely applied in the literature as a means to explain how or why a particular change occurred, and to understand the determinants of success, change, and continuity among HEIs (Bourgeois & Nizet, 1993; Sporn, 1996). As one early assessment of the HEI change literature put it: "Basically they [researchers] examined factors related to the compatibility and feasibility of an innovation given the political, economic and organizational realities, constraints and capabilities" (Parker, 1980, p. 434). Political model studies of HEI change, thus, often attend to the so-called "art of the possible." The political model, for instance, was applied to explain how in the 1990s the University of Botswana was able to implement substantial reforms through political consensus making, whereas, according to the author, limited coordination and conflict prevented reform at other universities in southern Africa (Ingalls, 1995). In a recent study, Martínez and Arellano (2021) applied a political model of HEI change to empirically test a set of hypotheses on the predictors of presidential turnover within Chilean universities. In both studies, we see how the political model is used to generate insights about practical matters of HEI management, given the relation between external demands and political organization within the HEI.

Since the field's inception, higher education scholars sought to understand how HEIs change in response to demands imposed from the external environment versus demands that arise from within. Already in the first issues of *Higher Education*, for example, many

articles reflected the assumptions that HEIs were relatively bounded organizations in which internal arrangements reflect endogenous concerns and a logical separateness from the “outside world” but which nonetheless cannot be fully isolated because of porous boundaries, reliance on external resources, and the need to satisfy external demands to maintain legitimacy. This imaginary is, however, not exclusive to higher education studies and, in fact, permeates much of organizational sociology and management scholarship (Scott & Davis, 2006). Its origins can be traced to the 1960s, when it was put forward as “a kind of a middle ground between mechanistic Taylorism and idealist administration theory,” effectively imitating Darwin’s earlier intention to “mechanize biology” by introducing concepts such as “organism,” “environment” and “adaptation” (Czarniawska, 2013, pp. 4–5). Although it came to be increasingly problematized and challenged, the organization-environment imaginary has remained central in higher education studies.

The taken-for-grantedness of the organization-environment imaginary in higher education studies has made the field a fertile ground for the application of a range of theories that share this premise. For example, resource dependency theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) and neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977)—both theories in the sociology of organizations—have informed a great deal of higher education scholarship that focuses on HEI’s change dynamics (e.g. Gornitzka & Maassen, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; and more recently Whatley & Castiello-Gutiérrez, 2022). These and other theories have been widely taken up by higher education scholars to make sense of how HEIs respond to external change or new demands imposed on them by what is often believed to be an increasingly complex environment (Christensen & Gornitzka, 2016; Frølich et al., 2013).

Theories from administrative sciences are another example. Huisman and Currie (2004), for example, conducted a multiple case study of four universities located in France, the Netherlands, Norway, and the USA to understand how HEI’s respond to increased accountability pressures. They foreground the regulatory and normative environments but attend closely to individual HEIs change in response to environmental demands, in which they draw on Romzek’s (2000) types of accountability framework. The organization-environment imaginary has also informed influential studies concerned with managing change. In a widely read article published in *Higher Education*, Jongbloed et al. (2008) identify the following problem: “Universities everywhere are being forced to carefully reconsider their role in society and to evaluate the relationships with their various constituencies, stakeholders, and communities.” Aiming to assist universities in making sense of their environment, the authors propose a tool for stakeholder analysis, which they borrowed from business studies.

Change in and across higher education systems

One implication of the salience of the organization-environment imaginary, which sets the field apart from classical management scholarship, is the attention to the role of the state. It is common in higher education research to treat the state as a “major environmental actor for universities and colleges” (Gornitzka, 1999, p. 28). Historical circumstances are important to consider why the nation-state looms large in higher education research. Since the 1970s, when governments around the world started to be increasingly interested in higher education, the stated aim has been, by and large, to make HEIs more aligned with the country’s social and economic needs (Maassen, 2003; Neave, 1998). In this section we draw attention to how, in making sense of change in national higher education systems, scholars

both engage with various social scientific traditions and cater for the practical considerations of particular national contexts.

Governments' systemic approach to higher education corresponded to a rich line of scholarship on change in higher education that centers on theorizing the role of the state in higher education, within specific countries and across them (de Boer et al., 2007; Enders, 2004; Maassen, 2003). Much of this scholarship comes from continental Europe where higher education is generally more tightly bound to the state than in the North America and Australia where the scope of the state is more limited (Teichler, 2013). To this end, higher education scholars looked not only at broader organizational theory, but also at policy studies, public administration, and related scholarship that could be instructive to make sense of the role of the state in higher education change. One example is the article by Ferlie, Musselin and Andresani, (2008), which argued that European governments increasingly sought to steer higher education—much like in other domains of the public sector. The steering patterns carried the imprint of broader public management reforms and their underlying narratives, principally, the New Public Management (NPM), the network governance and the Neo-Weberian narrative. The NPM narrative has been especially popular among higher education researchers as a way of making sense of the systemic character of higher education change (Amaral et al., 2003; Broucker & De Wit, 2016; Enders et al., 2009).

When studying change within and across systems, higher education researchers would draw on relevant theories from other areas, which they would then adapt to specificities of the higher education sector. Often, they would combine approaches from different theoretical traditions and use them to make sense of higher education. Åse Gornitzka's 1999 article "Governmental policies and organizational change in higher education" is a good example. In developing an analytical framework for studying change across higher education systems, Gornitzka starts by proposing that the "perfect flexibility or perfect inertia" assumption about change in HEIs can be overcome by integrating resource dependency theory and neo-institutionalism (1999, p. 6). These theories, according to her, could be fruitfully combined because they shared two basic assumptions: "organizational choice and action are limited by various external pressures and demands, and the organizations must be responsive in order to survive" (p. 7); yet they turn out not to be particularly helpful in accounting for the role of the state. Gornitzka here extends the framework by introducing Olsen's (1988) "four state models," which "can be retrieved in Western democracies in different blends" (p. 24). The framework put forward in the article is then offered to higher education scholars and used by the author as a conceptual "toolbox" for conducting comparative analysis of organizational change in higher education in eight Western European higher education systems—a research project funded by the European Commission.

Research on national higher education systems outside of Europe also often draws from different theoretical traditions. State theory and political economy play a larger role in informing the way researchers theorize system's change. In this scholarship, the state moves to the foreground and pluralist public administration and management approaches are deemphasized. Drawing on political economy theories of capitalist state formation, in their study of system expansion and transformation in the so-called BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), Carnoy et al. (2014) argue that "these states use the expansion of education, including university education, to simultaneously promote capital accumulation, economic growth, and political legitimation with the mass of families who want to enhance their children's employability and social mobility" (p. 362). The state is conceptualized as having more direct control over national systems compared to the European-based literature, and the legitimacy of a system's boundary separating higher education from the state is not taken for granted.

Another interesting example is the study of by Po Yang and Rong Wang (2020), which conceptualizes devolution and differentiation in China's higher education system using the Commanding Heights Strategy (CHS) concept, developed to explain the policy and politics of decentralization in contemporary China (Wang, 2014). They see the devolution in the Chinese higher education system as, perhaps counter-intuitively, resulting from the central state re-asserting its primacy in higher education. "As a firewall, the coalition mobilizes governmental and public support for national performance initiatives and prevents budget competition from other ministries. The CHS establishes and maintains a vested interest group through the [Ministry of Education's] vertical elite network and creates a steep institutional hierarchy in the higher education sector" (2020, p. 124). The Commanding Heights strategy is not theorized as a variant of "steering" governance or NPM, but rather a practice of Chinese statecraft. The CHS involves building elite networks that bind higher education to the state without a clear boundary of separation but also without relying on the direct command and control model from the postwar period that China imported from the Soviet Union.

Higher education researchers have also theorized the state in higher education through the lens of Gramsci's (1971) idea of the state as a site struggle and conflict. Although this line of research has been less extensively pursued, it is another good example of the higher education research field being a site of conversation between context-specific dynamics and social theory. In this formation, which has been used most prominently to explain higher education system change in Latin America, national HEIs and the higher education system are understood as part of the state-society complex that is the basis for forming a hegemonic bloc (Pusser, 2018). Various groups struggle for control of higher education systems, whose structure and purposes reflect the accretion of successive contests for control. From this state theoretical point of view, the practical meanings of concepts like university autonomy change as a result of historical circumstances and ongoing struggles for control of higher education by various often opposing social factions (Ordorika, 2003).

Global change in higher education

Systematic cross-country comparisons had been a feature of higher education studies since the mid-twentieth century, but they were not common until later in the century. In the postwar decades, and with the advent of international organizations, comparisons were "scaled up" to the world level. Towards the end of the century, researchers already amassed a wealth of evidence on how higher education systems changed, observed in isolation or in comparative perspective. The early 1990s saw the publication of first encyclopedias of higher education, including systematic descriptions of a large number of higher education systems. The first one was the *International Higher Education: An Encyclopedia*, edited by Altbach (1991) which included 67 essays covering different, mostly western countries. This was followed by a much more comprehensive undertaking published a year later, *The Encyclopedia of Higher Education*, jointly edited by Burton Clark and Guy Neave (1992). The four-volume tome included, among other sections, contributions on higher education systems from all over the world. This was, to our knowledge, the first ever undertaking to systematically describe higher education systems world over.

The emerging tradition of indexing and comparing national higher education systems has laid important foundations for the increasingly more salient view of higher education as explicitly "global." According to Google's book corpus, the today well-known collocation "global higher education," and to some extent also "international higher education,"

was not prominent in the postwar decades. To refer to the developments in the transnational realm, scholars of higher education would instead typically use the phrase “comparative higher education” (Kosmützky, 2017; Teichler, 1996; Välimaa, 2008). Since 1990, and especially since the early 2000s, the increase in attention to higher education as a global enterprise, in addition to its well-established status as a national one, has gained a momentum (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). Today, global higher education is not only widely studied, but also a well-established area of scholarly interest, with university courses, research groups, and academic publications dedicated entirely to this subject (de Gayardon, 2022; Rumbley et al., 2014).

Research on global change in higher education commenced when some higher education scholars identified globalization as the defining feature of the HEI environment. A global, or globalizing, environment meant that national boundaries, whether markets or states, or both, were no longer understood to be adequate analytic containers. And while scholars quickly pointed out that globalization was experienced by HEIs unevenly (Altbach, 2004), the global environment was conceptualized by researchers in the field as both territorially ubiquitous and inescapable. In 2009, Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), in their report for UNESCO’s 2009 world conference on higher education, explained, “It is not possible for higher education to opt out of the global environment since its effects are unavoidable” (p. 7).

The global change analysis, however, reflected at least two new ideas not found in the established comparative approach. First, national systems were assumed to be integrating, or becoming interconnected, so comparison no longer amounted only to identifying points of similarity and contrast among discrete bounded entities. Second, HEIs in all countries and regions of the world increasingly faced similar environmental conditions, necessitating global level analysis to go along with research into national governments and markets.

Higher education scholars were quick to observe that attention to transnational change reflected developments in the social sciences. Ka-Ho Mok assessed that since the 1990s, globalization had become a leading social scientific “mantra” (Mok, 2005). Social scientific interest was translated into higher education studies, as Jürgen Enders (2004) put it, as the “key themes” of globalization and internationalization. As with other lines of research on change, higher education studies borrowed extensively from the social sciences. Especially influential was the work by political scientist David Held and colleagues (see especially Held et al., 1999), who theorized governance as a multi-level, multi-actor process of restructuring and transnational integration along political, economic, and cultural dimensions; sociologist (and former Spanish Minister of Universities) Manuel Castells (see especially Castells, 1996), who theorized a transition away from industrialization and capital accumulation as the basic organizing logics of global capitalism, to networked organizations and flows of information; sociologist John W. Meyer (see especially Meyer, 2010), who in the neo-institutional tradition theorizes the emergence of a world society through the construction of actors with rationalized roles, constituted rights and shared values; and, perhaps to a lesser extent, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (see especially Appadurai, 1996), who theorized global culture as produced socially through intersubjective imagination and a global mediascape.

The aforementioned scholars do not operate from the same intellectual traditions and their theories about globalization, and implications for higher education transnational change, differ in important ways. In the higher education studies literature, scholars borrowed, blended, and elaborated these and other ideas about globalization to make sense of transnational change processes in higher education. Examples of research topics addressed from the transnational change perspective include particular management problems, often drawing on institutional management and sociological theories, such as HEI strategy for establishing international

branch campuses (Wilkins & Huisman, 2012) and broader problems of how HEI's "internationalize" (Seeber et al., 2016), as well generalized accounts of an "emerging global model" for organizing research universities (Mohrman et al., 2008), and conceptual development understanding HEI governance as occurring through a global regime (Zapp & Ramirez, 2019).

Restructuring, and especially restructuring along market logics that results in privatization, was a prominent theme in the transnational change literature during the 1990s and 2000s. Rizvi (2006) addressed the topic from a cultural approach and drew from Appadurai's notion of ideoscape—streams of symbols and values that circulate widely—to argue that privatization was a global ideology for higher education. Shared globally, however, privatization was translated and implemented heterogeneously based on cultural and political context. Rizvi argued that governments in Australia enthusiastically and uncritically embraced Anglo-American privatization values whereas the Chinese government implemented privatization reforms more strategically as administrative technologies selectively employed to achieve state and social goals. Drawing from Held's work and Marxian political economy, Torres and Schugurensky (2002) motivate the concept of privatization to Latin American reforms. While their argument is wide-ranging, Torres and Schugurensky saw privatization and reforms in Latin America as the result of coordinated efforts by national elites within the state and capitalist international organization like the World Bank to remake HEIs in the regional as more compatible, if not fully subordinated, to capitalism.

Global changes in higher education are now a prominent theme in the field's literature. It is surprising, then, that the field includes relatively few models to understand the widely recognized phenomenon. For the most part, higher education scholars rely on a simple binary model that sees globalization as a mega-environment in internationalization as the way in which individual HEIs and national systems change in response to environmental demands (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009). With the aim to address limits to the existing literature at the time, Simon Marginson and Gary Rhoades (2002) proposed a "glonacal agency heuristic," as a multi-scalar model for understanding global change. The heuristic integrated theory from Held and Castells with Clark's triangular model for higher education system coordination and highlighted the relevance of individual and collective agency. Although the field was well acquainted with the idea of globalization by the turn of the century, oftentimes globalization was seen as an amorphous force working everywhere but not for everyone (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009). Or, as Marginson and Rhoades put it, as a "shadowy" backdrop.

The glonacal model sought to provide a generic framework for empirically tracing how macro-scale developments were linked to local and national developments by specific (individual and collective) actors. Along with the globalization/internationalization binary model (Altbach, 2004), the glonacal agency heuristic is among the most widely adopted models in empirical research on global higher education change. And yet, most of the subsequent work that engages the model does not employ it as a framework to guide empirical inquiry, but rather appeals to the model non-specifically, much as the way globalization is invoked as a non-specific macro-environment.

Conclusion

In this article, we traced the interest in higher education change in the field's origins and its dual purposes of generating new academic knowledge, on the one hand, and practical information for improving intuitional management and system governance, on the other. The literature reveals traces of the academic quest to produce universal knowledge—insights about

higher education that are generic and can be applied to any context and time. Such efforts are, in our estimation, rarely achieved, which is at least partly evident in the shifting perspectives on change and import of disciplinary theory to investigate particular empirical problems. At the same time, researchers in the field (at least those studying change) never stray too far from the field's applied objectives. Research questions are frequently derived from practical problems while empirical articles often end with implications for policy and practice. Even when the change literature does not take up problems of practice directly, the relevance to university management and governance is rarely hard to see.

Returning to our initial questions: (1) why is change a central topic in the field of higher education studies and (2) how is change researched in higher education studies? We argue the field's origins as a first semi-coordinated response to growth in higher education enrollments and the associated problems for academic managers who were unaccustomed to mass education. Along with teaching and learning and a select few other topics, changing HEIs and higher education systems (nationally and globally) was one domain that allowed higher education researchers to establish legitimacy by negotiating between problems of management and abstract knowledge. Managing change is a particular type of practical problem because there is considerable ambiguity about higher education's goals and means (as a social sector). Such ambiguity lends itself to academic inquiry. But ambiguity—or scientific recalcitrance, as Clark put it—does not make the problems facing managers any less real to them. The duality of the problem—both abstract and concrete—allowed for object-oriented research practices that integrated both objectives, often awkwardly, to become legitimate and command the sorts of resources, such as professor lines, students, the right to issue degrees and academic journals, necessary to establish a field of study. This legitimacy made possible the sort of international cataloguing and classification of HEIs and systems that appears in higher education studies.

We argue further that the higher education change literature is organized into a set of sub-topics that not only loosely map to analytic scale, but also reflect different, mostly practical demands experienced by higher education researchers in their consultations with HEI managers and policy makers. The within HEI, national systems, and global change literatures also track with different branches of the social sciences and humanities, where psychology and cultural sociology is especially useful for within-organization studies; political science and institutional theories lend itself to national system research; and political economy, macro-sociology, and transdisciplinary social science inform the transnational change perspective. Because the field is linked with practical management concerns, when international student numbers increased in the 1990s and campuses began operating across-borders, the field engaged with theory on globalization to make sense of transnational change processes, following the pattern of theory borrowing and perspective adaptation used in the field founding.

Researchers turned to different theoretical traditions to best fit their problems and cases of interest. While theory importation was common, higher education researchers also drew together ideas that originated outside of the field to build concepts and models for higher education-specific explanations. Especially when theorizing the change in national higher education systems, we observed that the theoretical tradition that researchers called upon often reflected the formation of the particular nation-state(s) in question. In reviewing the literature for this article, we did find examples where template concepts, such as for example resource dependence and institutional isomorphism, were uncritically applied. By and large, however, higher education scholars appear to have selected theories, and in some cases built upon them, carefully with practical problems and specific objects in mind. While the Anglo-American influence on the literature worldwide is certainly discernable,

we are cautious in calling it hegemonic because other ways of thinking about change in higher education are clearly present. That said, much of the research that could be easily classified as organizational change or system change originates from North America and Europe and relies on theoretical traditions at home in the Global North. Perhaps partially because of our biases we did not find what one might consider a Global South approach to the study of higher education change; although, crudely, an “East/West” division, particularly with reference to theories of the state, is apparent.

In each line of change research, we observe the dual orientation emblematic of the field. Yet the change literature also reflects the field’s broad geographic extent (only partly examined in this review) and temporal variation. Researchers working outside of the USA, where the field first institutionalized, found new perspectives necessary to make sense of change in their respective regions or locations of empirical study. We see evidence of theoretical templates in use, whereby the Anglo-American experience is certainly overrepresented both in the extent of the literature and in the export of ideas applied to new settings. We also see extensive theory borrowing from other domains, and especially the established social sciences, which inform the outlook of higher education scholarship in important ways. Quite certainly, higher education researchers are prompted to consider and adopt new perspectives, often as a way of responding to trends both in the social sciences and in the higher education sector.

Generally speaking, scholars in the field draw from disciplinary theory heterogeneously and are sometimes in conversation with each other and sometimes not. The dual objectives found in the change literature, across each of the three lines of research, limit the cohesion of the higher education study corpus, and point to the field’s partial reliance upon, and subordination to, the social science disciplines. Limited disciplinary cohesion, however, does not imply that the literature is aimless. While much of the research on change in higher education features the field’s duality of instrumental and academic objectives, theory is understood largely in academic terms as a diagnostic tool for arriving at a-theoretical instrumental implications. The compound purpose of theory and theorizing is broadly evident. For example, theory of student engagement and persistence, initially rooted in Durkheimian theory (Tinto, 1975), was later elaborated as theory of high-impact practices for student learning and success (Kilgo et al., 2015), which, at once, explains, provides guidance and implies that some ways of education students are better than others. In our limited examination of the “theory work” in higher education studies, we observe that the “theory deficit” diagnoses do not do justice the field’s relation to theory (Hamann & Kosmützky, 2021, p. 469). We therefore agree with the recent call made by Hamann and Kosmützky (2021) to move the conversation on theory work in higher education studies towards a more serious examination of the field’s relation to theory. We add to this a call for a more systematic examination of the field’s relationship with the disciplinary knowledge more generally, as well as with the world of policy, management and practice.

We argue that the field of higher education, at least in its study of change, pushes social science theory into applied contexts while propagating ideas from sociology, political sciences, economics, and so on beyond the disciplinary boundaries. Similarly, researchers in the field adapt the problems of management and governance encountered by administrators and policy makers to forms that are suitable for scholarly and empirical inquiry and which are addressable using the theoretical and empirical tools of the social sciences. It is the work done in this interstitial location that sustains the field. On the one hand, higher education researchers are recognizable as academics to social scientists. On the other, they are seen, at least sometimes, as sources of potentially relevant expertise for institutional leaders

and policy makers who consult with higher education scholars and sponsor higher education scholarship.

Finally, we find it important to clarify that our aim here was not to argue that higher education research should be less applied or more “disciplined,” as some scholars would argue. Or that one theory is a priori more fitting for studying higher education change than others, or that higher education research should prove itself more useful to managers than it already is. We do not believe that any of these directions alone is desirable for the field, let alone realistic. Instead, we were interested in how higher education change is researched by scholars in the field and what it suggests about higher education studies.

Future research could build upon and extend our work through reflection and the practice of theorizing on the academic/practical boundaries. The field’s efforts to balance academic and pragmatic concerns could be further explored by asking, for example, where do research problems come from? Do policy issues or problems related to organizational management play a role in researchers’ choice of problems and questions? What (kind of) theories of organization are more likely to be imported from the disciplines and why? What motivates the choice of research method, in practical terms? What role does research funding play in any of this? And so on. We believe that addressing these questions would be a worthwhile exercise in researcher reflexivity that would benefit the field.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by Projekt DEAL.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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