

# The State and “Field” of Comparative Higher Education

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# Comparative studies

# Comparative studies

- Comparative studies have to some extent always existed
  - In their simplest forms: similarities and differences between countries/entities
- Become more prevalent as a distinctive part of research 150 years ago, even more so after WWII
  - Established branch of many disciplines / sub-discipline
  - Politics, philosophy, social sciences etc.
  - Focus on the **comparative method** → **generalizability and/or causality**

# Comparative studies

- As a sub-discipline/field, methodological focus rather than a topical one
  - Reflected in some essential definitions
    - Comparative politics: “indicates the **how** but does not specify the what” (Lijphart, 1971, p.682) → method > topic
    - Social policy: “comparative analysis is a **methodology**, rather than a substantive area of study” (Higgings, 1986, p.24)
  - “International comparative” ≠ international studies
    - Plus comparative not necessarily international



# Comparative education

# Comparative education - history

- Early beginnings: dates back to 1817 and Jullien  
→ strong methodological perspective
- Crisis in 1960-70s centred around “What is comparative education?”
  - Purpose, questions, units...
  - Method: little left today (Little, 2010)
  - Debate ongoing

# Comparative education as a field

- Intellectual construction (Manzon, 2018)
  - Debate about object, method, purpose ongoing (Manzon, 2011)
  - Changes in interaction with the world / other fields
    - Including development studies
- Comparativist has agency
  - Positionality of definition of “comparative education” (Marginson & Mollis, 2012)

## • Institutional structure (Manzon, 2018)

### Journals

*Compare*

*Comparative Education Review*

*Comparative Education*

*Prospects: Quarterly Review of*

*Comparative Education*

*Global Comparative Education* **NEW**

### Textbooks

Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local – Torres & Arnove, 2007

Comparative and International Education: An introduction to Theory, Method and Practice – Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2006

### Societies

World Council of Comparative Education Societies (N=43)

Comparative and International Education Society (US/of Canada)

British Association for International & Comparative Education (BAICE)

Comparative Education Society of Asia, Hong Kong, India, Nepal, Philippines

Sociedad Española de Educación Comparada

...

### Courses

Comparative Education M.A., IoE

Comparative & International Education, Columbia

...



# • Policy benchmarks at national level

## PISA 2018 worldwide ranking

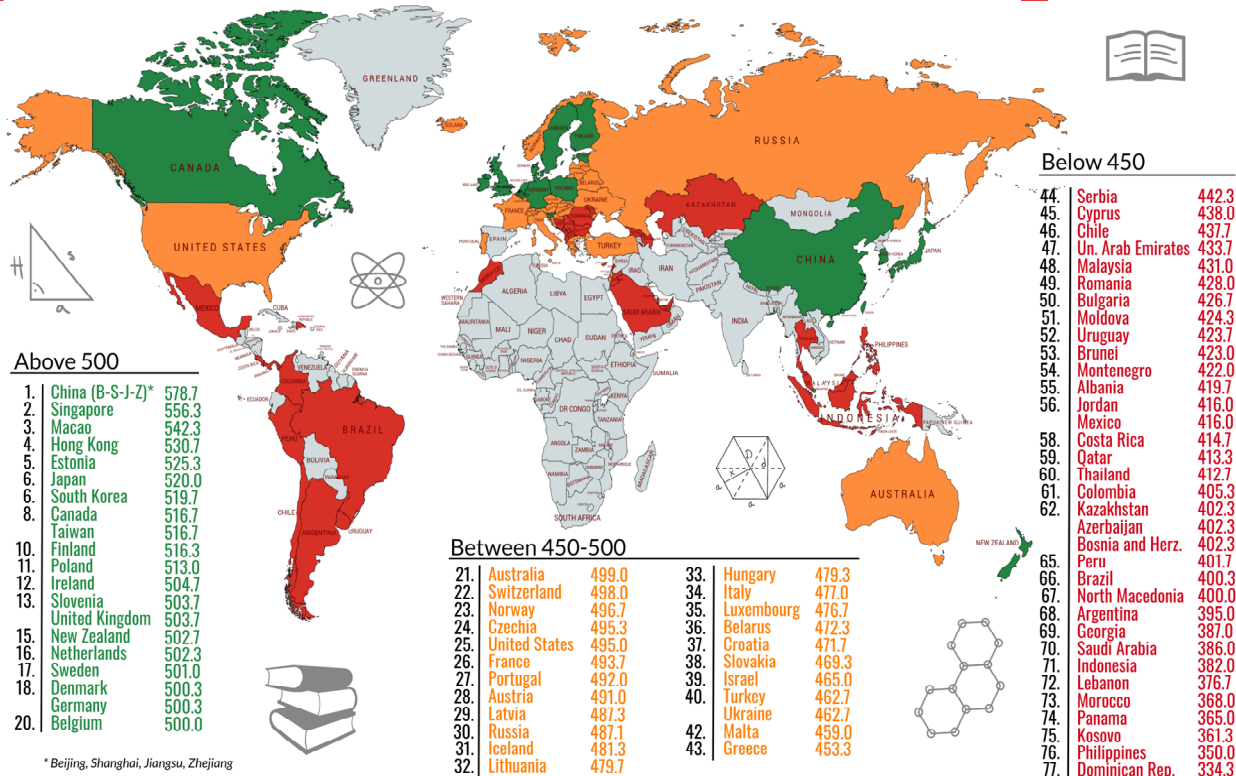
average score of math, science and reading

The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study by OECD in 78 nations of 15-year-old students' scholastic performance on mathematics, science and reading.

factsmaps.com

Source: OECD, 2018-2019

above 500 450-500 below 450



# Comparative higher education

# Comparative HE

- 1980s
- “research addressing phenomena of higher education in more than one ‘culture,’ ‘society’ or ‘nation’ systematically or in a single one in a comparative perspective” (Teichler, 1996, p.448)
- “analyses and compares similarities and differences as well as convergences and divergences” (Kosmützky, 2015, p.355)

# Question of identity? A field?

## Lack of institutional structure

- Journal
  - except *Journal of Comparative and International HE* (not really on the radar)
- Society
  - Rely on comparative education societies
  - Less on HE in international development conferences
- Research centres
- Textbook
- Degree (and few courses)

## Results

- “the standard accouterments of any academic field [...] journals, publishers [...], Web sites, national and international conferences, research centers and organizations, and others.” (Altbach, 2014, p.12)
- Disjointed field
- Lack space for debate

# Intellectual debate

- Is there a real debate about the identity of comparative higher education?
  - Marginal debate – few academics (comparativists?)
  - Too small a field? (Teichler, 1996)

# Recent methodological debate

- **Social dynamics** are different (Valimaa, 2008; Valimaa & Nokkala, 2014)
  - Attention to time, space and historical contexts
- Cross-country equivalents (Valimaa & Nokkala, 2014)
  - Linguistic equivalents
  - Effective equivalents
- Avenues for explanatory research (Cantwell, 2020)

# Recent methodological debate

- Typology of approaches to HE comparative research (Bleiklie, 2014)

Single country studies	Juxtaposition	Thematic comparison	Identifying causal regularities	Grand theories
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Knowledge through what makes them singular</li><li>• Provide tools for further comparative</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Few cases studies</li><li>• Salient features of each case</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Few cases</li><li>• Common set of questions</li><li>• Similarity</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Same phenomenon in different contexts leading to the same consequences</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Explain global phenomenon</li></ul>





# Lack of rigor of HE comparative research

- Kosmutzky, 2016
  - 6 journals, from 2004
  - Only 35 percent of comparative HE articles had explicit explanation of sampling strategy
  - 34 percent had implicit justifications
    - Quantitative study - Availability of data
    - Funding
  - No justification
    - Countries as examples of a phenomena



# Debate about the comparative project

- Hope, 2015; Kosmützky, 2018; Teichler, 2014
  - Cross-country teams:
    - Decentralised funding
    - Members (and countries of study) coincidental
    - Agreement hard
    - Methodological and data coordination
    - Longer than expected
  - Issues for quality and validity of the study

# What is missing?

- Mission
- Objectives
- More on method
- What unite the field/ the people doing it?

**Identity for the field**

# Should we care about comparative HE?



# The retreat of nations-states

- Globalization movement – towards global and rejecting the country
- HE's actors and outcomes are not bounded by borders
  - Academics
  - Students
  - Knowledge
- Methodological nationalism (Dale, 2005; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013)
  - Critic of the assumption that societies are bounded by nations-states borders
  - Imposition of stereotypes of one country onto others

# Danger of HE comparative studies

- Comparability?
- What can we really learn from a HE country that we have not experienced but simply study?
  - Lack of information
  - Lack of cultural awareness
  - Value judgement from the researcher's own experience
  - Especially true in HE where researchers experience their object of study from within
- Methodology approximative
  - Coincidental choice of countries
  - Language proficiency
- Falls short of the idea of generalizability or causality

# Yet...

1. Countries provide an easy clearly-defined unit of study
  - To achieve diversity
  - True for quantitative and qualitative research
2. Data is often found at the country level
  - Statistics
  - Documents, discourse
3. Generalizability increase

# Yet...

3. Policies are (mostly) voted at the state/country level
  - HE is a field concerned with policy
  - “taking into account factors that cannot adequately be observed and understood within the limits of any particular society” (Parkyn, 1977, p.89)
4. Policy borrowing has been a reality in higher education for a long time
  - Duty of researchers to precede politicians
  - Evidence to influence policy-making – “best practice” (Teichler, 2014), “trade-offs” (Delisle & Usher, 2018)
5. HEIs evolve in an international space – research and teaching
  - World is the frame of reference
  - Intentionality of comparative HE research

# Yet...

5. Learn more about HE phenomena
  - Through the ways they are working in different environments
  - Deconstruction of assumptions
6. Learn more about your own system
  - Through comparison and reflection on 'elsewhere'
  - Challenges “comparative chauvinism” or “comparative humility” (Teichler, 2014)
7. Theorisation of higher education research
  - Deepen conceptual understanding of HE
8. Comparative is NOT limited to international comparison
  - Open new avenues for the regional/national/local debate in higher education
  - Serve the global and local

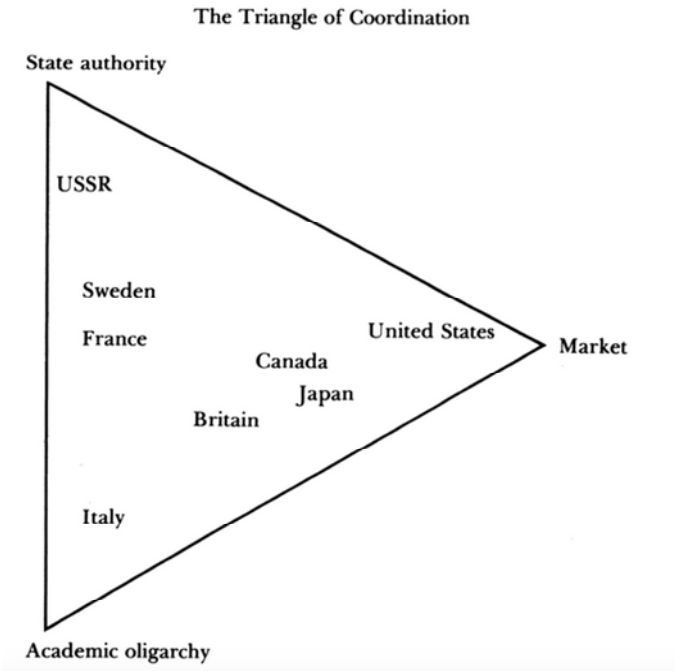


# The value of comparative HE

- Historically, great work has been achieved in HE through international comparative perspectives
  - Definition of new categories of HE systems
  - Creation of new theories based on “similarities and differences”
  - Increase our understanding of university systems
  - Increase our understanding of HE phenomena in different contexts
  - Increase our understanding of global phenomena

# Examples

- Clark's (1983) work on the multiversity
  - And his triangle – a conceptual comparative instrument
- Altbach's (1981) concepts of centers and peripheries
- Trow's (1973) definition of elite, mass and universal HE



	Elite	Mass	Universal
% enrolled	0-15%	15-50%	>50%

# Reflections for the future

# Build upon what is there

- The comparative method – robustness (Reale, 2014)
  - Concepts and classification
  - Testing (causal) hypothesis
  - Selection of cases
- Comparative education
- Comparative higher education



# Create an identity for comparative HE

- Past, present and future of comparative HE
  - Commonalities
  - Objectives/Mission
- Who is doing comparative HE research?
  - Community
  - What is a comparativist?
- What does it mean to do comparative HE?
  - Tools for more rigorous research
- Where is the debate taking place?
  - Society, journals...

**Creating the (sub-)field**

# Thinking about the research

- In comparative studies, ask:
  - Am I doing a comparative study?
  - Why do I compare? What is the values of comparative studies for this research?
  - What is my frame of reference in this comparison?
  - How did I choose the units (countries) of comparison? And why?
  - Which units (countries) am I not including?
  - How do I inscribe my research in the field of comparative studies?

**Intentionality**



# Thank you



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