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Opening up: higher education systems in global perspective

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Opening up: higher education systems in global perspective¹

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Abstract

Globalisation has strongly influenced higher education during the last decades. As in many other sectors, this has generated contradictory outcomes. Enhanced competition for reputation, talent, and resources was driven by the paradigm of the global knowledge economy and fuelled by global rankings, dynamic research funding, and international mobility. At the same time and in response, strengthened cooperation occurred within networks, systems, and regions. System convergence could be observed in parallel with a growing divergence and stratification of institutions. Inequality decreased at global level, while it increased within certain nations and regions. As a whole, higher education has opened up to the world and become more engaged at a global level. But how will this process continue with the current backlash against globalisation in Europe and the US and what will be the impact of other major geopolitical trends such as the rise of China? Prior assumptions and scenarios need to be critically reviewed. An equally critical review is needed of the theoretical models, methodological approaches, and concepts for the steering of higher education systems in a global context. How can system openness be effectively combined with the capacity to address globalisation effects on inequality?

¹ This paper is an extended version of the inaugural lecture “Opening up: higher education systems in global perspective”, upon the installation of the new chair on Higher Education Systems, delivered by the author on 12 December 2016 at Utrecht University.

Introduction

In times when walls are being put up and borders are being closed down, higher education is facing new challenges in its role towards the realisation of an open, democratic and equitable society. Recent geopolitical events and intensified populist tendencies are promoting a turn away from internationalism and away from an open society. Support for open borders, multilateral trade and cooperation is being weakened, globalisation is criticised, and nationalism is looming.

Brexit, the prospect of a disintegrating Europe Union, and of the US turning its back on the world create waves of uncertainty in higher education regarding international cooperation, the free movement of students, academics, scientific knowledge and ideas. At the same time China is launching new global initiatives such as the One Belt One Road (or New Silk Road) project, which could potentially span and integrate major parts of the world across the Eurasian continent, but likely on new and different conditions, also for higher education.

These changes require a critical review of our assumptions regarding globalisation and the international development of higher education. Should we revise our expectations? What can we learn from reviewing our previous scenarios in order to improve our understanding of what will determine the course these processes seem to be taking? What could this imply for higher education systems and the global higher education landscape?

In order to position the conceptual ways forward in research on higher education systems, an equally critical review is needed of the theoretical models, methodological approaches, and concepts for the steering of higher education systems in a global context.

Global changes: unanticipated consequences

Could we have imagined a decade ago Brexit, the closing of universities and obstruction of academic mobility after the failed coup in Turkey, pressure on the Central European University (notably founded on Popper's concept of an Open Society), and the American University in Kabul being attacked by IS? These and other recent events caused a big shudder in the higher education community. An impression of the 2016 conference of the European Association for International Education (EAIE), was expressed as follows: "What seems to have died is the European international education community's faith in the inevitability of the cosmopolitan project, in which national boundaries and ethnic loyalties would dissolve over time to allow greater openness, diversity and a sense of global citizenship." (Ziguras, 2016).

Could we have imagined a decade ago the shocks going through the US higher education sector since the election of President Trump? Fears for at least a temporary end of American internationalism, or the beginning of the closing of the American [open] door, and the sheer certainty that this presidency will be a heavy blow to the internationalisation of higher education were immediately voiced in the higher education press. The elections were followed immediately by student unrest across campuses and university leaders aimed to assuage their students' fear for their personal safety and their fear for the future. In their messages, they emphasised the values of diversity and inclusion and their institution's mission towards an open society. "As a community, we must use this moment to reaffirm our own values of respect and inclusion, while working together to preserve academic freedom, fearless inquiry, and diversity. Together we have both the will and the ability to rise above the rancor, to embody the best of what a free, open, and inclusive society should be." (Nicholas B. Dirks, Chancellor UC Berkeley, 9 Nov 2016). "As a community and as a practical force for good we are delighted and energised by our diversity, with a meritocratic openness to talent, culture and ideas from anywhere" (L. Rafael Reif, President MIT, 10 Nov 2016).

Could we have imagined a decade ago, not only the prospect of a disintegrating European Union, of the US turning its back on the world, but all international institutions and organisations being under pressure, and multilateral agreements being cancelled? In other words; the possibility of a less interconnected and integrated world? Let's take a step back and try to understand what may have happened.

Globalisation's discourses and discontents

Our "faith in the inevitability of the cosmopolitan project" was supported by definitions of globalisation that were inherently progressive, i.e. the widening, deepening, and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness (Held et al, 1999), with growing interdependence and convergence between countries and regions. Some even claimed at some point that the "world was flat", suggesting a level playing field with equal opportunity for all competitors, including individuals as the drivers of the 3.0 version of globalisation (Friedman, 2005). But the world wasn't flat and serious warnings have been given all along the way, signalling notably the risks of inequality, of globalisation not only generating winners, but also losers. Already around the turn of the millennium, Castells (2000) pointed out that globalisation leads at the same time to development and to underdevelopment, to inclusion and to exclusion, risking global economic imbalances with detrimental effects on social cohesion. Stiglitz (2002) criticised globalisation for developing countries as a result of imperfect global governance structures and practices. James (2001) stated that from an historical perspective, globalisation is not irreversible and that it was at that moment weakened

or at least stagnating. While Gray (2002) argued that globalisation was already over and that in particular the global free market economy had been a utopian project, since its contradictions as testified by flows of asylum seekers and economic refugees had been too easily overlooked. And even earlier on, historian Paul Kennedy warned in 1993 against our lack of structures to deal with a global world, while political economist Dani Rodrik rung similar alarm bells in 1997.

Higher education scenarios revisited

In fact, it was a decade ago, in the summer of 2006, that the impact of these tensions on the higher education sector were becoming clear. A meeting of OECD ministers for higher education taking place in Athens was so seriously threatened by protesting students that it had to be relocated to the safety of a nearby peninsula. The student demonstrations had strong anti-globalist features protesting against proposals of the Greek minister to regulate foreign providers active in the country, which was seen as deregulation and privatisation of higher education. While these riots were going on in the streets of Athens – where so many more occurred during the following European economic and financial crises – the ministers were discussing four future scenarios for higher education (OECD, 2006). These were constructed along two main dimensions: the extent of globalisation (global–local) and the amount of influence of (state) government (administration–market), and were shortly described as follows:

1. Open networking

In this scenario, the key driver of change is the further harmonisation of higher education systems (expanding the impact of the Bologna process beyond Europe), leading to increased trust and understanding as a basis for easy recognition of degrees. Next to that, lower costs of communication and transportation and information and communication technologies greatly facilitate cooperation and mobility, and the civic society ideal of open knowledge (open source) allows sharing of knowledge and data resources.

2. Serving local communities

This scenario is driven by a backlash against globalisation and by growing scepticism to internationalisation. The changing public opinion has derived from terror attacks and wars, problems with immigration, outsourcing, and the perception of threatened national identity. Growing geo-strategic tensions lead to the launch of more military research programmes on which governments impose serious security classifications.

3. New public management

The main driving force in this case is the mounting budget pressures created by an ageing population. There is more use of new public management tools, including market forces, financial incentives (competitive funding), increased autonomy and accountability, deregulation, and so on.

4. Higher education inc.

This scenario is strongly driven by trade liberalisation in education (through WTO or General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS] or on the basis of bilateral free-trade agreements). Low transportation and communication costs, the increasing migration of people, and the rise of private funding and provision of higher education further facilitate the emerging international marketplace for higher education and academic research services.

As the then President of the OECD's higher education programme (IMHE), I moderated this ministerial discussion and noted in a later analysis of it that: "the fourth scenario, which is most global and market driven, is for many the most likely scenario to occur, while at the same time not exactly the most desirable direction for most of them" (Van der Wende, 2007, p. 278). Globalisation was thus perhaps not really positively embraced by these ministers, and probably even feared by some, yet acknowledged as the major driving force for the sector. At the same time, many were implementing national policies much in line with scenario 3 (New Public Management) within their countries, as a way of working towards scenario 1 (Open Networking) at international level, especially in Europe. However, scenario 2 (Serving Local Communities) was *not* much discussed or seen as a very likely direction for change.

Yet, a decade later it is exactly this backlash against globalisation as described in scenario 2, caused by terror attacks, immigration, outsourcing, and the perception of threatened national identity, alongside heightened geopolitical conflicts, that is unfolding today. And the launch of ambitious new military research programmes has been announced recently with a five billion euro EU fund to stimulate investment in defence-related R&D (Reuters, 30 Nov 2016).

Rebalancing globalisation – failed?

Yet a decade ago, it was already clear that globalisation was creating global economic imbalances with detrimental effects on social cohesion; that re-balancing globalisation was needed and that this would have consequences for higher education institutions. I then argued that it required higher education institutions to broaden their missions for internationalisation. Not only respond to the profitable side

of globalisation, but also address related problems such as migration and social exclusion. To be more open and inclusive, to balance economic and social responsiveness, to define their “social contract” in a globalised context. (Van der Wende, 2007). In the local context, this means enhancing access for migrant and minority students, supporting the integration of student groups with different cultural, ethnical and religious backgrounds, and embracing diversity as the key to success in a global knowledge society. To become true international and intercultural learning communities where young people can effectively develop the competences needed for this society and become real global citizens (Van der Wende, 2011).

This is consistent with Martha Nussbaum’s (2012) arguments in favour of cultivating the humanities and world citizenship: that for education, economic growth isn’t the only rationale, but that higher education institutions have to contribute to “a public response to the problems of pluralism, fear, and suspicion our societies face” (Nussbaum, 2012). Today our societies are facing these problems indeed. More so than we could have imagined in our optimism during the heydays of internationalisation, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the signing of the European Treaty (Maastricht 1992) and the ensuing (too) rapid expansion of the EU. More so than we could have feared during the following years after the turn of the millennium with growing criticism of globalisation and academic capitalism.

And now, many fear for the future and world leaders denounce global citizenship: “If you believe you are a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere” (Theresa May, 2016); “There is no global flag, no global currency, no global citizenship” (Donald Trump, 2017).

Growing scepticism of internationalisation can be heard in public and political debates on trade, open borders, migration and refugees, and also on higher education. Xenophobia and discrimination against foreign students has long been reported in countries such as Australia, South Africa, and Russia. But more recently in the UK (in relation to Brexit) and in the Netherlands, parties at the extremes of the political spectrum are launching critical questions in parliament on the costs and benefits of international students and worrying about reduced opportunities and access for domestic students (“domestic students first”). Similar political pressure has been observed in Denmark and Germany.

Scepticism of internationalisation can also be heard inside academia. Some even report on “anti-internationalization” (Rhoades, 2017). Critical voices rail against internationalisation as an elite cosmopolitan project; against the use of English as a second / foreign language for teaching and learning; against global rankings and the resulting global reputation race with its annual tables of losers and winners; against the recruitment of international students for institutional income; and other forms of “academic capitalism”.

As far back as the early 2000s, students in different (mostly Southern) European countries took to the streets to protest against European higher education policies (or “Bologna”). Academics themselves may now list internationalisation, among such trends as massification and underfunding, as a cause of higher education’s current problems. Calls for students to be primarily trained for domestic labour markets are being heard, and the local and national mission and relevance of public higher education is being (re-)emphasised, contrasting with the striving for global reputation and impact. These voices may not be representative of the dominant perspective or of the formal discourse, but do raise questions about whether or to what extent academia’s internal debate is developing conservative traits that may result in tendencies towards academic nationalism, protectionism, or indeed isolationism”?

In order to improve our understanding of these negative trends that seem to contest our prior scenarios and optimism and that seem to contradict our beliefs and expectations, we first need to analyse what has been overlooked to better understand what is likely to determine the course these processes may take in the higher education sector.

A major aspect of this analysis will be that, in contrast to Nussbaum’s (2012) argument that education is “not for profit”, higher education continued to be driven by the knowledge economy paradigm, as well as develop itself into a driver of the knowledge economy.

The global knowledge economy: global flows and shifting imbalances

The knowledge economy paradigm builds on neo-classical economic and human capital theory, in which intellectual and human capital are key requirements for economic growth. (Higher) education is a producer of that human capital, in terms of “talent” and “skills”. In the global knowledge economy, nations, corporations, and public organisations are competing across borders for talent, reputation and financial resources. So too universities, fuelled by global rankings and the increasingly global flows of students, researchers and funding (Van der Wende, 2008; 2009; 2011).

Let’s take a look at these global flows and try to analyse the growing and shifting imbalances and inequalities therein.

On the world map of the highly ranked so-called “world-class universities”, the global flows of students and researchers confirm a geography in which these scientific powerhouses are strongly positioned as global magnets for academic talent (Van der Wende, 2015).



Figure 1: World-Class Universities (map ARWU 2015) and global flows of talent & funding (Van der Wende, 2015)

Flows of students, post-docs and researchers indicate the largest flows from Asia to the USA and the second largest from Asia to Europe. Within Europe, flows are increasing from south to the north in the wake of the financial crisis. Smaller flows concern traditional patterns of south-north and some west-west mobility. More recently some west-east flows are emerging, partly related to the return of the diaspora to India and China (ADB, 2014; OECD, 2015; UNESCO, 2013; 2015). Most recently great uncertainties occurred regarding the flows to the UK and US, while at the same time this may make China more successful in attracting talent, which it will certainly try to do (see next section).

Flows of people are indicative for the flows of funding, i.e. through international fee-paying students and through dynamic funding mechanisms where “money follows people”. For instance, the European Research Council’s (ERC) funding which has been criticised for contributing to the growing imbalances within Europe (Teixeira, 2013; Zecchina & Anfossi, 2015). Global mobility of researchers demonstrates important imbalances across countries and regions. For instance, the USA relies heavily on immigrants for its R&D and aims to improve “stay rates”, especially for degree holders in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) fields as it needs them for the US workforce. Experts underline in general the vulnerability of countries overly dependent on immigration for their R&D capacity (Auriol, 2010; Proudfoot & Hoffer, 2016). Critical questions have been raised as to whether this reduces job opportunities for US researchers and in 2015 the US Council on Foreign Policy published a report on “Balancing China”, asking whether the US should continue to help build the competitive advantage of its main competitor, China, by training so many Chinese graduate students. Under the new US presidency a change of policy directions may occur, as was recently demonstrated in the announced reconsideration of H1B visa for foreign students and researchers.

International or foreign student enrolments as a percentage of total tertiary education

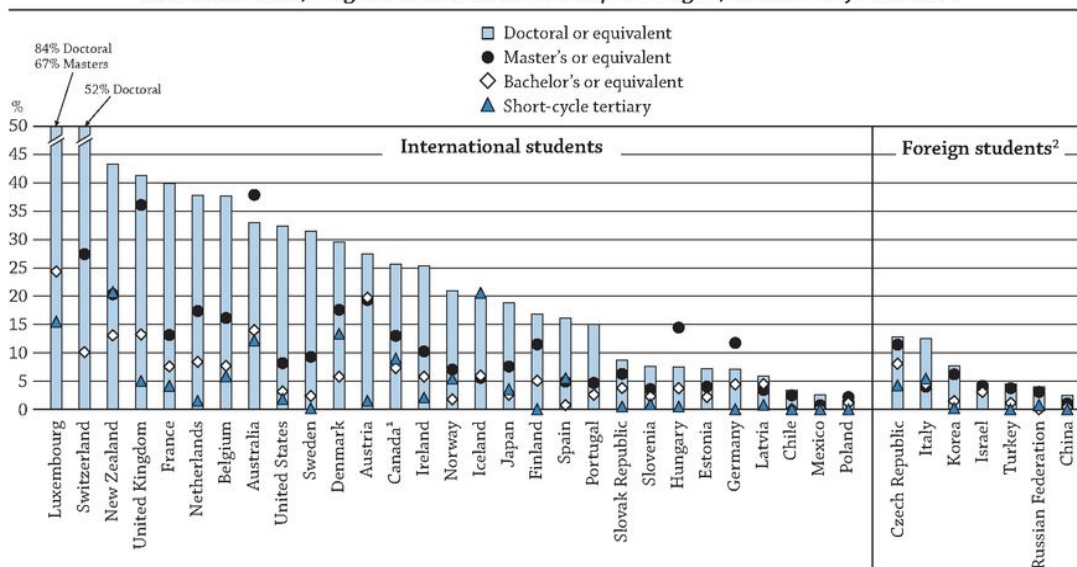


Table 1: Student mobility in tertiary education, by ISCED level (2013) (Source: OECD Education at a Glance, 2015)

Global imbalances are also reflected in international student mobility, which has more than doubled over the last decades to over 4 million today and these flows have always been clearly in favour of the OECD countries. This brain gain is especially acute at the most advanced levels; 24% of PhD students are international on average across OECD countries, against an average of 9% in all levels (OECD, 2016). The bulk of doctoral education is provided by relatively few institutions globally, notably in the USA and the UK which account for over 50% of all international doctoral students (UNESCO, 2015). The competition is particularly focused on STEM since these skills are considered critical for innovation, technological progress, industrial performance, and thus economic growth (Auriol et al, 2013; Freeman et al, 2014; Gokhberg et al, 2016; Avvisati et al, 2014). The USA alone accounts for nearly half of all international PhDs in these STEM fields (UNESCO, 2015).

International students represent more than 40% of PhD enrolment in the UK, Switzerland and the Netherlands (with again strong concentrations in STEM). These three countries are also the world's top performing countries in research impact and quality and have the highest return on investment from ERC funding by attracting many ERC grantees from other countries. Two of these countries are facing serious uncertainties with respect to academic mobility and EU funding as a result of the 2014 referendum on immigration in Switzerland ² and the 2016 referendum on EU

² In December 2016, the Swiss Parliament agreed on a *Federal Act on Foreign Nationals* and reached a compromise with the EC regarding the free mobility of EU nationals. It was allowed back into

membership in the UK (Brexit). In the Netherlands several parties are seeking a quorum for initiating this type of referendum³. Hence the warning mentioned before regarding the vulnerability, which seems to apply in particular to these very successful and very *open* systems.

Meanwhile, the reach of the dynamic and internationally competitive funding mechanism such as the ERC is increasingly global. Agreements between the ERC and other major research funding councils in the US (NSF), South Korea, Japan (JSPS), and China (among other countries) were recently signed. The production of scientific knowledge is shifting to the international level; the proportion of publications involving international collaboration has nearly doubled since 1996, reaching close to 20% in 2013 (UNESCO, 2015).

The key players in this field – the leagues of research universities, such as the American Association of Universities, the League of European Research Universities, the China 9, and the Australian Group of 8 – position themselves at the global level. The first global agreement on the characteristics of these research universities was signed in October 2013 in Hefei, China.

China's rise – global rebalancing?

China's higher education system has developed at an unprecedented scale and pace and is now the largest in the world in terms of student enrolment. Although its investment in higher education and R&D as a percentage of GDP is still below OECD average, it is – because of its size – second in terms of its share in world expenditure on R&D (China's GERD is 19.6% compared to 19.1% for the EU and 28.1% for the US, putting it second in position for the world's largest R&D budget in PPP) and for its world share of researchers (19.1%, compared to 22.2% for the EU and 16.7% for the USA). China's growth is greatly contributing to the increase in the number of researchers worldwide (21% since 2007 to 7,8 million in 2013), which is again mostly observed in STEM fields (all data for 2013 in UNESCO, 2015). China is ready to offer researchers very attractive packages if needed (South China Morning Post, 27 April 2016).

Horizon2020 in early 2017 under strict conditions, but not yet into Erasmus+. Negotiations on Brexit have only just started at the time of writing.

³ As a result of the March 2017 elections, these parties were not among the ones that are the most likely to join the next coalition government.

Share of World GDP (2013) Shares of World Expenditure on R&D (2013) World share of researchers (2013)

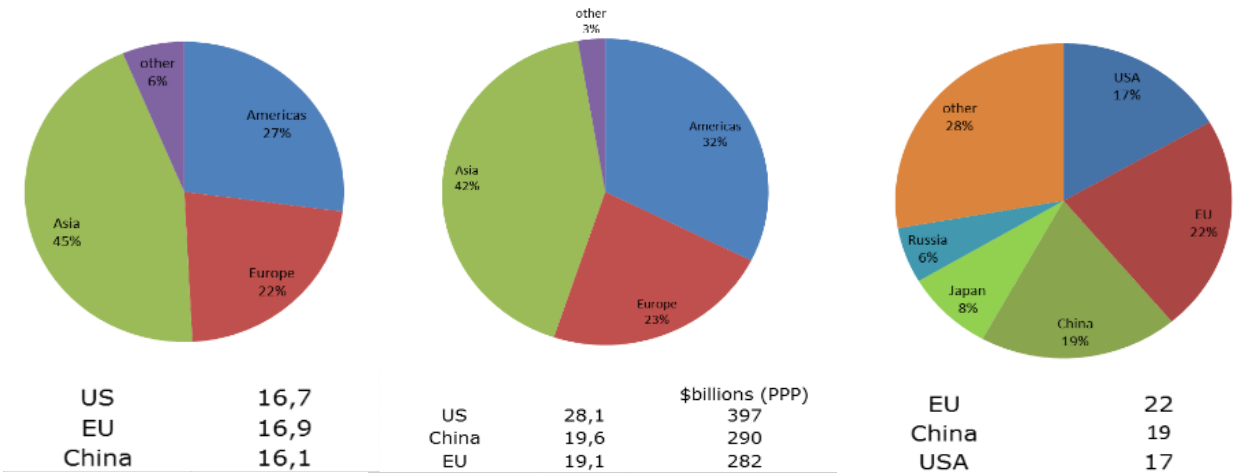


Figure2: China's Rise (data source: UNESCO SCIENCE REPORT Towards 2030, UNESCO, 2015)

China is clearly re-balancing global inequality in higher education. However, it is doing so in a very particular, narrow, way. A significant share (43%) of China's R&D is dedicated to development and relatively little (4%) to basic research, and its R&D spending is (still) heavily oriented towards developing S&T infrastructure (OECD, 2015). This may be strategically motivated in relation to technological innovation, economic growth and geopolitical positioning (f.i. cyber security). And it is reflected in the rather skewed development of its higher education system which is also developing along a narrow STEM route, concentrating on fields such as engineering and computer sciences. There are now 39 top engineering schools in Asia, 42 in the US, and only 19 in Europe. China's top engineering schools now dominate those in its region and rank in the world's top 10 for engineering and top 25 for computer sciences (ARWU, 2015). This implies a potentially skewing effect on developments in the sector globally, i.e. driving the already strong competition in STEM fields even harder.

China's progress in humanities and social sciences is much less compelling. And research quality and impact are still lagging behind, as seen by the fact that China has a much smaller size in terms of citations received from abroad than would be expected from its overall publication volume (OECD, 2015). This is probably why China is seeking more cooperation. Its new higher education policy (part of China's 13th 5-year plan) focuses on hubs to connect its best universities to the world's best. At the same time, China is still an important source for talent recruitment by the US and Europe, it also conforms a series of skills gaps, and has (until recently) limited success in regaining its diaspora (Welch, 2015).

Yet the balance with the West may change with China's One Belt One Road (or New Silk Road) project. Recently a range of cooperation agreements on higher education and research have been signed with partners in Europe (THE, 2016). Questions

around China's role in global higher education are becoming more prevalent: will China at some point reach parity with the West? Will it take a leading role in higher education? It is certainly time to view China as no longer a follower in global higher education (Van der Wende & Zhu, 2016a, 2016b).

China is willing to take the lead in economic globalisation, as expressed by President Xi Jinping in his opening speech at the 2017 World Economic Forum, especially now that the new US administration seems to be turning away from it. China is even willing to lead in the 2015 Paris agreement on climate change. It is determined to restore its central place in the world through major initiatives such as building a New Silk Road that is designed to logistically reconnect and perhaps economically integrate the Eurasian continent.

China's impact on the global higher education landscape is growing. With the emerging uncertainties regarding the flows of students and scholars to the US and the UK, "China stands to gain as its universities advance in global visibility" (Postiglione, 2017) and will be more successful in its aim to attract global talent (back). The New Silk Road will carry more than consumer goods. As in previous historical periods, people, ideas and knowledge will travel along with mutual influence. But how and under which conditions? Will it follow the way China tries to influence the working of the internet, as a "pure and safe" environment (but by banning the New York Times)? The political atmosphere at Chinese universities has become tense. Central oversight infringes on academic freedom, e.g. the discussion of "Western values" in classrooms has been restricted and recently 29 top Chinese universities were put under tighter control by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. The rather skewed development of its higher education system focuses strongly on the STEM fields strategically relevant for its geopolitical positioning, while its progress in humanities and social sciences is much less compelling from a Western point of view.

The European higher education landscape may be affected by an even stronger concentration in fewer but larger research hubs, especially in STEM fields. The resulting stratification puts the classical model of the comprehensive European research university further under pressure. Will economically weaker regions and countries be able to sustain this model of the university, or will they have to choose more specialised profiles, i.e. in less capital-intensive fields in the social sciences and the humanities? What does this imply for the meaning of the university in its social-cultural context and how will this affect the European (Humboldtian) values around the teaching-research nexus in the various disciplines and the important bridges between the (natural and life) sciences and the humanities and social sciences?

Will China's values impact the way knowledge is developed and disseminated globally, will it influence global (or Western) ethical standards for research? Do we actually understand these Chinese values at all? How can we prepare our students

for safe travels on these new silk roads towards the future? A new challenge for internationalisation is emerging: to enrich our vision and understanding of the world, to widen our focus from being predominantly or even exclusively Western, and to open it towards a new history of the world (Frankopan, 2015).

Globalisation, inequality, and higher education

Thanks to scholars such as Thomas Piketty (2014) and Branco Milanovic (2016) our understanding of the paradoxical outcomes of globalisation has developed, especially regarding the impact of globalisation on inequality (as previously developed by Stiglitz, for example). They argued that while economic and social inequality has *decreased* at global level, mostly due to the growth of Asian economies, notably China, it has *increased* within certain countries and regions. These patterns are to quite an extent reflected in higher education and research. The previous section confirmed the re-balancing effect of China's rise on the global higher education and research scene. UNESCO (2015) signals the widespread growth in the number of researchers, which demonstrates that since 2011 China has overtaken the USA. The EU remains the world leader, while Japan's and Russia's shares have shrunk between 2007-2013 (from 10.7% to 8.5% and from 7.3% to 5.7% respectively). UNESCO more generally states that global imbalances are decreasing as the north-south divide in research and innovation is narrowing, with a large number of countries moving towards knowledge economies and cooperation increasing between the regions. Empirical research finds positive externalities of mobile researchers and suggests it is not necessarily a zero-sum game and thus doesn't necessarily come at the expense of the source country (Scellato & Stephan, 2014). Mobile researchers are higher performers (OECD, 2015), the so-called "movers advantage". However, these minds concentrate more and more in fewer hubs, thus creating bigger inequalities and contributing to the further stratification of the higher education landscape (Van der Wende, 2015).

Global inequality also decreases as student numbers are exploding globally. The numbers studying abroad have increased at an even greater rate, although as they represent only 2% of the student population, this brain drain does not represent a threat to the development of national systems (UNESCO, 2015). However, public financial support for higher education is under pressure in many countries. Total spending across the OECD went up over the last decade (from 1.3% of GDP in 2000 to 1.6% in 2013), but the public share of it (1.2% in 2013), traditionally strong in Europe (up to 1.7% in the Nordic countries), has become more and more difficult to sustain and this gap is widening in Europe (mostly along the south – north axis) in the wake of the financial and economic crises (OECD, 2016).

The American model in which private contributions become more important is increasingly followed (in for instance the UK and the Netherlands), while it is being

strongly criticised at its home base for issues of equity and decreasing value for money (Economist, 2015). Thus the meritocratic role of higher education is waning in Anglo-American societies with neoliberal policies that became significantly more unequal in terms of income from labour and notably from capital. The importance of (higher) education in explaining income differences in such societies is diminishing and family background and social connections may matter more, especially in societies that are already approaching the upper limit of educational participation (Marginson, 2016a; Milanovic, 2016). Moreover, the notion of a tertiary education premium is also being called into question as graduates' average debt is rising fast in these countries, substantial proportions of graduates take non-graduate jobs, and an increasing proportion of jobs, irrespective of their status, are threatened by technological progress, robotisation, and the application of artificial intelligence (see for instance: Goldin & Katz, 2009; Susskind & Susskind, 2015).

Global positioning, local commitment, and inclusive internationalisation

Thus, while global inequalities in higher education tend to decrease, its potential to compensate for increasing inequalities in rich countries, i.e. its meritocratic role, is being called into question. The resulting pressure on the sector is two-faceted: enhanced competition at global level and a growing critique of local commitment and delivery. Especially the pursuit of global positioning on rankings is being criticised for “jeopardizing universities’ national mission and relevancy in the societies that give them life and purpose” (Douglas, 2016), and for creating a divide with local, regional, and national responsibilities (Hazelkorn, 2016). And for making universities become “footloose from society as an academic jetset of international [cosmopolitan] types who live in their own world” (Bovens, 2016).

Many universities are currently being challenged by local stakeholders regarding this (im)balance between global prestige and local commitment. While global higher education [as a global public good] was thought to be in principle well placed to redress inequality by driving the knowledge economy, scant attention has been paid to it. Moreover, contributing to ideas of justice for the future requires universities to recognise problems of their past and present (Unterhalter & Carpentier, 2010). Universities have a long history of exclusion by gender, ethnicity, and social class. Despite expansion of tertiary education opportunities, too many universities remain best at serving elites, nationally and globally. When domestic markets stagnated they turned to global markets of disproportionately privileged international students (Rhoades, 2017). Hence the current scepticism and criticism of internationalisation.

I previously argued that in order to rebalance globalisation, higher education institutions were required to broaden their missions for internationalisation. Not only to respond to the profitable side of globalisation, but also to address related

problems such as migration and social exclusion; to be more open and inclusive; to balance economic and social responsiveness and to define their “social contract” in a globalised context (Van der Wende, 2007). Also, to enhance access for migrant and minority students, support the integration of student groups with different cultural, ethnical and religious backgrounds, and to embrace diversity as the key to success in a global knowledge society (Ibid, 2011). The current anti-globalisation sentiments urge us to take even more responsibility for addressing the growing inequality between the winners and losers of globalisation. This is not accomplished by treating internationalisation and diversity as two separate themes or policy areas, as has been the case in higher education in recent decades. Internationalisation needs to be inclusive, i.e. embrace diversity in all its dimensions. Or as stated by Rhoades (2017): recenter on class inequities by including all “others”.

Some universities may have been more successful than others, but higher education’s effectiveness is open to question, not only in relation to inequality, but also in relation to democracy. Phrases like “we have created Europe and now we have to create Europeans”, which were first heard after the rejection of the EU Constitution in 2005 by the Netherlands and France, are now being repeated. What was higher education’s role in this? Did we fail to develop European identity and citizenship - goals of the Erasmus programme - in our students? Should we expect to hear more from the more than three million (former) Erasmus students, in defence of Europe? Are the Erasmus alumni all part of the silent majority or have they all become the now criticised cosmopolitan elite? Did we fail to educate them as critical thinkers, oriented towards social responsibility, democratic citizenship, and civic engagement in support of an open society? Or as recently stated by Peter Scott (2017): “Is the rise of populism a wake-up call, is the academy on the wrong side of history?”.

Ongoing critical debates

The above critique of globalisation and internationalisation coheres with the critical discourse on “academic capitalism” that has been ongoing since the 1990s (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016). It also relates to the debates about world-class universities versus national flagships (Douglas, 2016) and to issues concerning world-class universities versus world-class systems. The risk of building world-class universities at the expense of other types of institutions [in the system] has been acknowledged and founded the concept of “world-class systems”, which should be able to counterbalance the trends towards isomorphism resulting from an intrinsic striving for world-class status and so effectively cater for the diversity of demands and needs for higher education. These concepts would not necessarily be mutually exclusive: world-class systems are both a prerequisite for world-class universities, and a source of support. Yet it is acknowledged that only few countries will have the necessary resources to do so (see for instance, Salmi,

2014; Van der Wende, 2014; Marginson, 2016). Consequences for institutional mission, differentiation, and system-level steering are therefore to be analysed critically, including a review of the underlying concepts and theoretical assumptions. This will be discussed in the last section.

Methodological issues and theoretical challenges

Obviously, higher education cannot be blamed for all evil – as much as globalisation cannot be blamed for everything bad in higher education. The relationship is dialectic: all universities are exposed to globalisation, partly as objects, victims even, but also, especially research universities, as subjects or key agents of globalisation (Scott, 1998). This complicates our thinking about the topic and is also why research in this area is really complicated. Globalisation can be a “garbage can” type of independent variable. It is difficult to attribute effects precisely to it and to define the appropriate unit of analysis for analyzing these. As pointed out by Milanovic (2016): with globalisation the trans-border movement of people, income, and capital lead to statistical issues, but are in many instances more useful to study. Especially for the study of global inequality, we should be aware of the shortfalls of taking the nation state as a natural unit of analysis, as this leads to “methodological nationalism”; instead of using country averages, thus covering up differences and heterogeneity, the approach should aim to uncover dissimilarities.

In the same fashion, international comparative higher education research does not sufficiently cover the study of the dynamics of internationalisation and globalisation in and around higher education (Van der Wende, 2002). This has created continued shortcomings in many studies of higher education, including well-known OECD reports. The limited scope for globalisation was due to the methodology applied in the OECD reviews: a parallel compilation of national reviews with some cross-case analysis on particular themes (Ibid, 2011).

Such methodological problems seem to have a conceptual base in research on higher education systems. The understanding according to which universities are embedded in a system was, according to Teichler (2007), the “hidden agenda of the 1960-70s and this social construct became more than a new understanding. It became a social reality” (p. 254). The study of these systems has since focused on structural aspects (types of institutions and length of programmes) and on quantitative-structural developments (size and expansion, degree of diversification, etc.) of the system. Such studies were systematically carried out within the boundaries of a (nation) state.

The conceptualisation of system–level steering (coordination) was developed in the 1980s, distinguishing the academic oligarchy, the state, and the market as the main driving forces in the system (Clark, 1983). But again, this was defined within state boundaries, thus (implicitly) as a *closed system* in a national context.

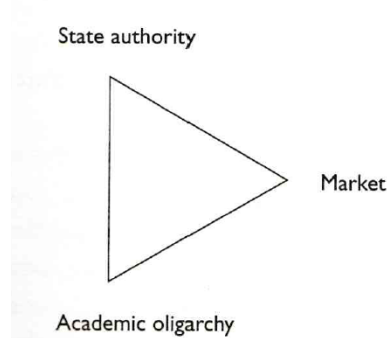


Figure 3: Triangle of coordination in higher education (Clark, 1983)

From the 1990s onwards HE systems were more often studied in an international comparative perspective in order to better understand the effect of policy and steering.

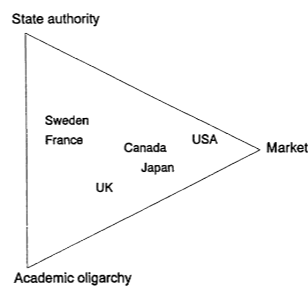


Figure 4: Selected countries in the triangle of coordination (Goedegebuure et al, 1993, p. 4)

Supra and international factors gained more influence on national HE systems and internationalisation became a characteristic of the system. It was recognised as a new element and scholars realised that new conceptual frameworks were required for the study of these phenomena which could be treated as common elements in different countries as it was conceived in traditional comparative research (Goedegebuure & van Vught, 1994; Teichler, 1996). Within the traditional model, it was assumed that the steering or coordination was still to happen within the bounded (national) state reality.

I further challenge this implicitly *closed* conceptual model in 1997, by putting it explicitly in an international context.

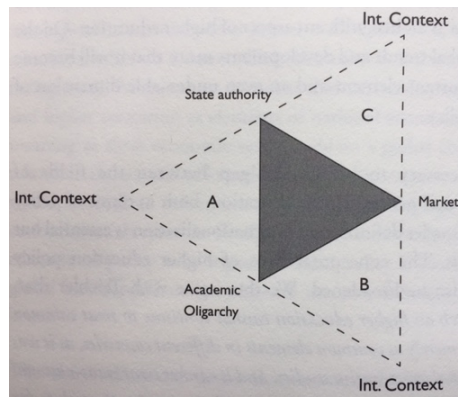


Figure 5: Coordination of higher education in an international context (Van der Wende, 1997)

There are several questions that arise:

- A. What is the interplay between the international, national, and institutional forces in the shaping and establishment of national policies for higher education and how does this affect these policies and the higher education system more generally?
- B. What is the interplay between the international context, the market and the institutions in the shaping of institutional policies and how does it affect these policies?
- C. What is the interplay between the international, national, and market forces in the shaping of national policies for higher education and how does this affect these policies and the higher education system more generally? (Van der Wende, 1997, p. 34).

These questions received particular attention in the European context, because of the establishment of supra and inter-governmental initiatives, such as the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. Borrowing from institutional, resource dependency, and multi-level governance theories, this led to a series of publications and PhD dissertations at CHEPS⁴, which provided insights into:

- Patterns of both convergence and divergence (Huisman & Van der Wende, 2004; 2005)
- The continued importance of national actors and policies – also in internationalisation (Luijten-Lub et al, 2005; Witte et al, 2008)
- That institutions are thus globally engaged but nationally embedded (Beerkens & Van der Wende, 2007; Vlk et al, 2008)

⁴ The Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente, where the author was affiliated to from 1998-2016.

- That cooperation and competition at national and international level evolve in a matrix of strategic options and thus enhance complexity, the need for strategic management, leadership, and more autonomy (Van der Wende, 2007)

Not only individual institutions but higher education systems are also increasingly exposed to the dynamics of globalisation and internationalisation, the complex interplay of these processes, and the multiple ways in which higher education institutions are involved in both. The challenge this represents for the study of higher education systems as conceptually positioned within national state boundaries became increasingly clear, i.e. that international comparative higher education research does not provide sufficient conceptual foundation for the study of the dynamics of internationalisation and globalisation in and around higher education.

As more scholars started to question the national-based *closed* conceptual model of higher education systems, they found that the nationally-bound concept of a higher education system was indeed found too limited as a base for research: “the field lacks a framework for conceptualising agencies and processes that extend beyond the nation state” (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Further empirical research found significantly enhanced activity of both governments and institutions in the global sphere and into new zones of strategy making, aiming to maximise capacity and performance and to optimise the benefits of global flows (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2009).



However, as there is no actual governance framework in this global space, steering deficits have occurred in areas such as quality assurance, funding, and regulation. These led, among other things, to degree fraud, diploma mills, improper financing structures, and re-migration issues; nor have they been found to be effective in addressing growing inequality within and between systems as resulting from globalisation, as discussed before.

These steering deficits clearly challenge existing nation-bound institutional arrangements as a basis for system-level coordination. Open systems represent challenges that may occur related to questions like:

- To whom are public universities accountable for their global performance, which can be shaped as private enterprise abroad, foreign investment, aid, joint venture, or a contribution to global public goods?
- Is institutional performance and positioning of research universities defined by the ability to attract, retain, and accumulate human and financial capital at global level? (a “Piketty-style” hypothesis for academic capitalism)
- Are such world-class universities then drifting away from national systems and indeed becoming “footloose” like multinationals?
- How can an open system effectively deal with incoming foreign providers, including those funded by foreign governments or controversial religious organisations?

A particular challenge is related to the concept of a world-class system, which is expected to support a combination of world-class excellence and effective internal system-level diversity in order to cater for a range of different stakeholder interests. But do we effectively understand how globalisation forces affect processes of (de)differentiation within higher education systems? What steering mechanisms would allow these two seemingly conflicting aims of global excellence and national relevance within an open system to combine? How do traditional and perhaps new types of internationalisations fit in?

These are big questions for governments that are seeking policies to respond effectively to the reality of open systems, i.e. optimising the benefits of global flows and opportunities, while facing the task of legitimately regulating a public sector expected to provide access, opportunity, quality, equality, social mobility and cohesion and to contribute to employability, innovation and economic growth. Yet, they need to be faced since there is no real alternative; higher education’s mission in both research and teaching requires a global perspective. How else can universities educate students as global citizens and contribute to solving global challenges through their research, if they were to be kept within the boundaries of a (closed) national higher education system?

Yet the resulting flows, processes, and transactions exceed the reach of a nation state, which has “become too big for the management of everyday life and too small to control global flows of capital, trade, production, and information” (Castells, 1998). At the same time there is no global governance, or at best “global governance without global government” (Stiglitz, 2002), or “a nascent process of global governance” (Milanovic, 2016). The same applies to higher education, where “Universities may function across territories, but there is no overall sovereign of the kind that we find in national jurisdictions, but rather a patchwork of coordination and

orderliness [...] increasing isomorphism and convergences in regulatory governance across jurisdictions, is significant in contributing to higher education as a nascent “world system” (King, 2009, p. 190). And even though globalisation has been slowing down in economic terms for a decade, de-globalisation or return to the local is not an option, because it would do away with the division of labour, a key factor of economic growth (Milanovic, 2016, p. 192). The global division of labour in higher education is better understood, in terms of cooperation and an open exchange of ideas and knowledge, especially in the light of emerging realities such as open access, open science and open educational resources. Thus: “no system of higher education and research can be purely national; neither higher education systems, nor the individuals within them, can prosper behind national walls” (Corbett, 2016).

In order to effectively research such questions, higher education systems should be explicitly conceptualised as systems open to their international / global environment. An open systems approach has been theorised by van Vught (1996; 2009), based on neo-institutionalist perspectives combining insights from population ecology and resource dependency theory and focusing on how processes of (de-) differentiation take place in higher education systems. He postulates that (a) the higher the level of uniformity of the environmental conditions of higher education institutions, (b) the larger the influence of academic norms and values in higher education institutions, and (c) the stronger the competition for scarce resources, the lower the degree of diversity of a higher education system will be. These processes take place through various forms of institutional isomorphism (increasing similarity in organisational behaviour). These hypotheses should be developed to build a better understanding of the effect of globalisation and internationalisation on processes of (de-) differentiation, the resulting diversity within higher education systems, and to unravel the effectiveness of steering options.

Various possible approaches and ideas could contribute to such an open and extended theoretical framework for research on higher education systems. Recourse to globalisation theory could be made, assuming that it produces contrasting outcomes; the idea that global flows are no zero sum game, and the idea that the relationships between globalisation and higher education is dialectical could be incorporated. Contrasting perspectives need to be sought, as institutions may function differently across countries and in a global context.

The methodological and theoretical challenges implied need priority for advancing the study of higher education systems, since openness and internal differentiation are the key factors for combined excellence and relevance, including the capacity to address globalisation effects on inequality, that is to be expected from real world-class systems.

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