

A Comparative View On Policy Trends In Western European Higher Education

Jeroen Huisman
CHEPS (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies)
University of Twente
and
Frans Kaiser
CHEPS (Center for Higher Education Policy Studies)
University of Twente

Abstract

This paper gives an overview of the most relevant policy developments (1999-2001) regarding higher education in a number of Western European countries. The focus is on Austria, Denmark, Finland, Flanders, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The following issues are addressed. Firstly, which issues are major issues in these countries in this three-year period? Secondly, can we explain why these issues are on the agenda? Thirdly, do the policy developments suggest increasing convergence in policies? We maintain that current policy issues reflect the existence or emergence of five global trends in and around higher education. The ubiquitousness of these trends explains why Western European governments are considering similar policy issues. However, this does not necessarily imply that governments in practice are offering similar policy solutions. It would be more accurate to state that the similar trends challenge governments to find policy solutions most suitable to reach specific national solutions in specific national contexts.

Introduction

It is not a secret that higher education systems across the continent – let alone those further away – have their particular characteristics. Historical legacies (bearing on philosophical traditions, such as those of Von Humboldt, Newman, etc.), but also more

recent developments, including governmental policies, have shaped the higher education landscapes. Such contingencies help us to understand, for instance, why research in one country is organised differently from that in another, why professors in some countries have a stronger power position than in other countries, etc.

The logic of the above would challenge us to put forward the expectation that policy trends are path-dependent. That is, each (public) system has its own development and dependent on the problems and challenges a government is confronted with, policies will be developed to steer higher education in the desired direction. Only in the case of global trends, seriously affecting higher education, could one possibly expect that governments develop fairly similar policy solutions to similar problems. The massification of higher education (following the increasing demand for higher education) may be considered as such a global trend. Many Western European governments have introduced similar solutions to the problem of the overcrowding universities and its concomitants: budget problems for governments, a concern for the maintenance of quality, a concern of universities being unable to meet new demands, etc. The solution was to establish a non-university sector, a solution aimed at both meeting the demands and to safeguard the universities. However similar the general policy solutions to massification may seem, the differences should not be downplayed. Not only the pace of change is different: some countries introduced or upgraded non-university sectors in the 1960s (polytechnics in the United Kingdom, *Fachhochschulen* in Germany, *hoger beroepsonderwijs* in the Netherlands), others did only recently (*Fachhochschulen* in Austria, *Ammattikorkeakoulo* in Finland), whereas still more

are considering introducing such sectors. Even more important than when these changes occurred, are the specific details of the changes and their consequences. Throughout the countries that implemented non-university sectors, there are clear differences regarding the degrees to be offered, the size of the non-university sector (both in actual enrolments and the range of disciplines offered), the governmental control on these sectors, etc. (see also Teichler, 1988; Huisman & Kaiser, 2001). Given these differences, it is not surprising that the developments in the countries have different dynamics, leading to different outcomes over time. Systems differ to the extent whether non-university sectors still exist or have disappeared, but they also differ in the role these sectors play in the higher education system.

To summarize, even in the case of global trends, one should be careful in drawing conclusions on similarities in policies. A quick look easily conceals important differences, both in terms of the policy developments as well as their outcomes.

Europeanisation: a converging force?

A critical reader may comment on the final observation in the previous section. Apart from the fact that only one example was mentioned, one could argue that the times have changed. Policy developments regarding massification in the 1970s cannot be compared to those at the turn of the millennium for several reasons. One is that policy makers in higher education are consciously much more aware of trends and developments in other countries. Policy makers have changed from being introspective to being more outward looking. Instead of viewing higher education

in relation to secondary education, as part of the national welfare state and as a means to solving national manpower problems, the attention increasingly shifted towards higher education as part of the national economy in a competitive international perspective and towards adjusting higher education to international developments, particularly developments in other higher education systems. The references to international policy experiences in national policy documents, as well as the demand – by policy makers – for comparative research on higher education, may serve as sound indicators of the change to becoming more outward looking. A second reason is that supra-national policies were almost non-existent in the 1970s and nowadays much more prominent. National and institutional internationalisation policies and activities have been developed in a dynamic interrelationship with internationalisation policies at the supra-national level (De Wit and Verhoeven, 2001; Van der Wende, 2001). The signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations and the agreements concerning the European Research Area can be seen as illustrations of such supra-national level developments, although one has to stress that the former example is in fact an intra-national (between nation-states) development and the latter a European Commission (supranational) development.

There are several theories that could help us in putting forward hypotheses on policy trends, policy convergence (e.g. as a result of learning, imitation, coercion, see e.g. Hall, 1993; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993, see also Rakic, 2001 for an analysis of convergence in higher education policy). Our aim is, firstly, to describe and analyse which policies are on the agenda in Western

European higher education systems. Secondly, we will try to explain why these policies are on the agenda and thirdly, we will speculate about convergence or divergence of policies.

Data and analysis

The methodology applied is as follows. Policy documents and secondary literature (including popular academic journals and web-sites) on higher education were analysed by country experts. These experts wrote short annual reports on the (policy) developments in the country they were responsible for. These reports were commented upon by higher education experts (e.g. representatives from the Ministries, academics) in the respective countries. If necessary, the reports were adjusted. The finalised reports formed the basis for the comparison of developments across the countries (Beverwijk et al., 2000; Kaiser et al., 2001, 2002).

In determining major and minor issues, not only actual policies were studied, but also initiatives – however immature – were taken into account. We believe that the relative attention paid to the policy issues in policies documents, web-sites and (academic) debates and the national experts' reflections gave reliable outcomes regarding the importance of the policy issues. We based the relative importance of the policy issues across the countries on the number of times the issues were mentioned in the annual reports. An imaginary example: if “funding mechanisms” were policy issues in Denmark in 1999 and 2000 and in Germany in 2000 and 2001, the policy issue “funding mechanisms” was given a score of 4. The appreciation of the importance of the policies issues across the countries seems less reliable than at the specific

national level, but it should be taken into account that the researchers involved have a considerable amount of experience in (comparative) policy studies and that the relative rough measure of counting the issues nevertheless reflects the importance of the policy issues across the nine countries.

A word of caution concerns the fact whether a policy issue A in country X is similar to the policy issue A in country Y. Although there may be some gradual differences in the stresses within different countries (the context in which the issues are discussed, the 'tone' of the debate, the participating actors in the policy debate, etc.), we believe that overall the analysis does justice to the general developments within and across the countries. In cases where a specific topic received a different content or emphasis, we considered that as a separate issue. For example, the debate on quality assurance as such gained momentum with the emerging debates on accreditation, i.e. the discussion on how to validate and make transparent the quality of study programmes and institutions. We judged the issues of quality assurance and accreditation to be sufficiently different (in terms of policy objectives and instruments) to speak of separate issues. However, we did not – for instance – split attention paid to the introduction of tuition fees and/or the lowering of grants to students. We would consider these two as variants of a similar policy: increasing the private contribution of students to higher education.

A final remark concerns the specific situation in Germany. Whereas one may maintain that there are seventeen governments (sixteen at the state and one at the federal level) developing higher education policy, for this exercise we took the German national level

policy debate as a point of departure. We acknowledge that there are significant differences between the states regarding attention to specific policy issues, policy objectives and instruments.

Policy issues at the turn of the century: an overview

The following table (table 1) gives an overview of the most important policy issues across the countries. We included issues that were mentioned/discussed at least five times in the nine countries. The rows indicate the policy issue, and the columns indicate the countries. The final column gives the total score of the importance of the policy issue (i.e. the number of times/years an issue was mentioned in the country reports).

Table 1: Major issues in higher education

	Au	Dk	Fi	Fla	Fr	Ge	Nl	Sw	UK	Total
Degree structure: Bachelor / master	3x		2x		2x	3x	3x	3x		16
Finance: funding mechanism		1x		3x	1x	1x	2x	1x	3x	12
Finance: student support / fees	2x				3x	3x	1x	2x	1x	12
Continuing education / life long learning		2x	2x	2x	3x			1x	1x	11
Information and communication technology	1x	2x	1x		1x		2x	1x	1x	9
Academic staff	1x	1x			2x	2x	1x	1x		8
Widening participation		2x	1x					3x	2x	8
Quality assurance	1x			1x	1x	1x		1x	2x	7
Relation HE – industry			1x	2x	2x				2x	7
Accreditation	1x	1x				2x	2x			6
Institutional autonomy	2x			2x		1x	1x			6
(Post)graduate education		1x	2x		1x			1x		5

The descriptions presented above provide a rich overview of the major issues in public and political debates regarding higher education.

The Bologna-process is the dominant issue in higher education. Especially the most tangible element of the process, the creation of a bachelor/master degree structure, is in many countries (heavily) debated. Only in the UK (already having a bachelor-master structure), Denmark, and Flanders, the degree

structure is not on the list in the period until the end of 2001. Recently, in Flanders the Bachelor-Master structure was on the political agenda. Among the remaining countries, the type of discussions regarding the degree structure differs. There are countries in which the new structure has an added-on character (Germany), where the structure is to replace the existing structure (Austria, the Netherlands) and where the main part is a labelling operation (France).

Financial issues were on the agenda in most countries. In general, in Denmark and France there was a strong government commitment to increase the funds for higher education. Changes in the funding mechanisms of higher education were discussed in all countries, except for Austria and Finland. The organisation of the students' support-schemes was another financial issue that appears on the list. In Austria, France and Germany, the scheme as such or the size and scope of the existing system, were changed significantly.

In the discussions on the knowledge society, the issue of lifelong learning is an important element. In the policy debates on higher education this issue was often mentioned, but it must be stressed, it was particularly the objectives, which were mentioned, and not so much concrete policy instruments. The issue is relevant in Scandinavian countries, France and Flanders.

Information and communication technology (ICT) in higher education is another 'hot' issue that is high on the list. Particularly in the year 2001, this issue gained attention in the policy debates. In Denmark, Finland, France, the Netherlands and Sweden the discussions and policies are, for the most part, on the

creation of consortia of providers or of other types of platforms (such as virtual, digital or internet universities) to co-ordinate and stimulate the use of ICT in higher education.

Academic staff and, in more general terms, human resource management is an issue, that has been on the agenda for quite some time. The ageing of academic staff and the associated future problems in replacing the outflow of staff, as well as the under-representation of women among academic staff, are important issues. However, these issues were not high on the national agendas; that is, they were mentioned (particularly in Austria, Denmark, France and Germany), but did not seem to be given much priority compared to issues such as the degree structure and financial issues.

In addition to the 'big' issues in table 1, there is a list of issues that arose in a smaller number of countries. These issues were: research infrastructure (the organisation of research within and outside the university sector, policy priority-setting regarding research topics, the role of intermediary bodies, etc.), secondary education reform (the organisation of the preparation for university and non-university education), mergers (particularly between smaller non-university institutions) and institutional co-operation (both between universities and between universities and other higher education institutions, the issue of research at non-university institutions), student diversity (gender, ethnic minorities), pedagogical renewal (modularisation), diploma supplements, higher education and the labour market and (financial) contracts between governments and institutions.

An exploration of the importance of policy issues

As has been stressed in the introduction, no attempt will be made to theoretically explain why certain policy issues are on the agenda and why some are more important than others. We confine ourselves to an exploration of these questions. We do so by first setting out the five general, mostly exogenous, trends that have an impact on higher education, particularly in Western Europe. Without asserting that these are the only or the most important trends, we think that these – more or less universal – trends cover most of the factors of influence on higher education systems in Western Europe (and to some extent in other parts of the world too). Please note that the trends should be distinguished from the policy issues. The difference is that the trends are considered as general exogenous factors, which are mostly autonomous developments in or around higher education. Policy issues are basically concrete issues, including objectives and instruments, to ‘solve’ current problems.

Changing relationships between governments and universities: There used to be a relatively strong bond between government and higher education institutions through funding, legislation, and planning mechanisms. However, governments have taken a step back and opened the arena for greater autonomy and free market mechanisms (Gornitzka, et al., 1999). In this context, Neave’s (1988, 1998) analysis of developments in Western Europe is revealing. He points to the striking change from *ex ante* governmental control by legislation and procedures to *ex post* justification by quality assurance and accountability measures. This development was

particularly visible in Western Europe in the 1980s and in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s. The situation is quite different in the United States. It combined public policies and market mechanisms throughout its higher education history, but particularly since the 1970s. As governments retreat – to some extent – from higher education, other interest groups may enter this arena. As a consequence, higher education systems and institutions are confronted with changing and different, sometimes conflicting, expectations from their stakeholders.

Efficiency and value for money: A related development is the growing trend of governments to document value for money. This is partly due to the effect of the increasing world-wide demand for higher education putting pressure on governmental and public sector budgets. Higher education for the elite at fairly autonomous institutions, was fine with those responsible at national levels; however, with increasing student numbers, the cry for efficiency and effectiveness became louder. This is also partly due to members within society, for instance parents and taxpayers, challenging the presumed quality of higher education. The critical public and governmental viewpoints have heightened the attention paid to aspects of accountability. According to Trow (1996), accountability has replaced trust. In many countries during the past decade, a specific element of the value for money issue has shifted from considering higher education as a public or quasi-public good towards considering higher education as a more private good. Within this context debates occurred regarding the introduction of tuition fees and student grant systems or interest-bearing loans. Understandably such debates have impacted the accountability issue.

Students confronted with increased private costs for higher education may be more critical of the services delivered in exchange.

Internationalisation and globalisation of higher education: National borders were once evident; however today, globalisation of the economy, that is the free flow of goods, services, ideas, and people, has blurred these boundaries. Globalisation has facilitated the entrance to foreign higher education institutions and business organisations into national arenas and has blurred the previously homogeneous cultural and normative expectations concerning the nature and future of higher education. This cultural change, which may only be a gradual long-term change, raises questions related to accountability. Should foreign institutions be treated in a similar manner to national institutions or should they be treated differently according to their position, possibilities, and duties within the higher education landscape? Additionally, should foreign institutions be accountable to the government in their home country or to the government in the country where they preside? In this context the current, but very preliminary, debates regarding the inclusion of education in the General Agreement on Trades and Services (GATS) are also relevant (see Altbach, 2001). What if higher education is included in the WTO agreement, does this imply that such global arrangements supersede national or supra-national, for instance European, agreements on accountability?

The knowledge society: Although this trend is often surrounded by rhetoric, undeniable present-day societies are moving towards economies in which the production, transfer and refinement of knowledge

plays a major role (see e.g. Beck et al., 1994; Gibbons et al., 1994). Whereas most analysts would endorse the general development, the opinions regarding the consequences differ considerably. Will traditional mode 1 knowledge production disappear in favour of mode 2 knowledge production? Will universities lose their long-time monopoly position in the discovery and transfer of knowledge?

Information and communication technology developments: The increasing technological possibilities particularly in the context of information and communication technology have hastened the internationalisation and globalisation processes. This adds to the previous point in two ways: 1) that the actual location of a higher education institution becomes less relevant as technologies allow institutions to work globally and easily across national boundaries; 2) questions regarding legal and political control over less tangible or virtual institutions become more urgent and complex.

To summarise, we assume that the various interrelated exogenous trends affect higher education. In particular developments in information and communication technology, in the knowledge society, and in internationalisation and globalisation are considered trends that take place largely independent of what is happening in higher education. In other words: these three trends presumably affect higher education (and not the other way around) and it is up to national governments and individual institutions to react to these trends. The other two trends are of a different nature. They have their roots in the 1980s, when, as higher education for the masses was increasing, along with a decreasing trust in

governance, governments were encouraged to develop other steering relationships with public sectors in general. Steering from a distance, decentralisation and deregulation were elements of that new approach to higher education. A new approach that more or less coincided with careful attention to the share of the governments' budgets that was spent on higher education. This triggered many governments to develop an ambiguous relationship with higher education: on the one hand more leeway for the institutions, but at the same time, a pressure on these institutions to deliver value for money. The trends of efficiency or value for money on the one hand, and changing relationships between governments and higher education on the other, can therefore be seen as partly endogenous trends. Political choices, made some decades ago, (largely forced upon by external factors such as increasing numbers in higher education (massification) and distrust of public sector governance) have over the past decade – given the dynamics of the step-by-step changes – had repercussions for policy making at present.

Considering the five trends, we are not surprised that policies directly linked to these trends are high on the national agenda. The major policy issues in table 1 can easily be linked to the five trends:

The attention in policies for the degree structure and accreditation are an outcome of the signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declaration in the late 1990s. These policies are clearly related to the trends of internationalisation and globalisation, and in particular to the aim to transform the European knowledge economy (including higher education as an

important element of that economy) to compete with other regions of the world.

The policy issues of continuing education, life-long learning, widening participation and – to some extent – postgraduate education, can be linked to the trend of the knowledge economy in which flexible knowledge workers are able to contribute to the nation's (and region's) position in the economy world order. It is assumed that in order to compete, a much larger participation level is necessary and that the current recipients of higher education will need re-education after they enter the labour market. To a considerable extent policy issues regarding academic staff are relevant here, since in most countries the question is how to secure sufficient academic professionals who are able to contribute to the refinement and transfer of knowledge. The attractiveness of the profession and the ageing of staff are crucial elements in these policy debates.

The issues relating to finance, both the changing funding mechanisms, to quality assurance and to the current thoughts about public support for higher education and private contributions of consumers, can be traced back to the trend towards efficiency and value for money. These issues also relate to the general change in the relationship between government and higher education, in which government transfers some of its former duties to the market.

The trend regarding information and communication technology has a direct impact on policies relating to supportive policies to implement ICT in higher education. However, the trend and the policies should not be seen solely in their one-to-one relationship. The drive for implementing ICT also

relates to the trend of the knowledge economy: ICT would enable – in theory – more flexible forms of (higher) education, which could contribute to widening participation and to flexible learning of mature students.

Finally, the policy issue of institutional autonomy is clearly linked to the changing relationships between government and higher education institutions. That this issue is still on the agenda – debates on changing steering relations started in the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s – is to some extent surprising. The explanation is that governments have partly sent out contrasting signals to the higher education institutions: on the one hand, the promise of increasing autonomy (governments stepping back), but on the other asking for value for money (quality assurance, efficiency, etc.). The first requires governments to abstain from policies and regulations; the second requires governments' interference. It is therefore no surprise that tensions still exist in the relationship between governments and institutions.

Conclusion

The previous sections seem to indicate that global trends, such as changing relationships between governments and universities, the call for efficiency and value for money, internationalisation and globalisation of higher education, the emergence – or even institutionalisation – of the knowledge society, and the growth of information and communication technology, imply that governments across Western Europe address similar policy issues. The most striking issues are the degree structure: Bachelor/Master, finance issues (funding mechanisms

and student support systems), and continuing education/life long learning. The first policy issue is closely linked to the trends of internationalisation and globalisation and the transformation of the European knowledge economy. Financial issues are clearly connected to the trend in efficiency and value for money and the third policy issue (continuing education and life long learning) relates to the knowledge economy.

We therefore may speak of a considerable amount of similarity in policy issues across the countries. The data also seem to imply policy convergence, but actually we would need data on a longer time span, than just the three years we investigated, to come to a firm conclusion. Nevertheless, it appears that the global trends are rather pervasive and lead to policy convergence.

This general conclusion, however, needs two qualifications relating to the fact that looking for convergence makes us, to some extent, blind to details and differences. Firstly, let us not forget that governments across the continent still address issues that seem to be specific to only one or two higher education systems. Examples are, for instance, student diversity in Sweden and the United Kingdom, student participation in governance in Denmark and Sweden, and pedagogical renewal in Sweden and France. Secondly, although there is seemingly consensus on the emergence of similar policy issues, this does not imply that policy objectives, instruments and outcomes are similar. The examples given on the variety of ways of how the nations go about the implementation of the new degree structure and changes in the funding mechanisms illustrate this. We therefore would

conclude that – overall – global trends affect the higher education policy agendas of Western European governments, but that a closer look at the details of policy-making reveals many noteworthy differences. These differences are presumably related to structural and cultural characteristics of the higher education systems and the institutional contexts of these systems. In this respect, specific (policy) changes in the European higher education systems are path-dependent. We predict that these differences will continuously play a role in the next decade and particularly the dynamics these differences will bring about (e.g. unexpected outcomes of changes) will continue to counterbalance the general trend towards policy convergence.

Notes

¹ Given the separate responsibilities of the communities in Belgium regarding (higher) education, we focus on Flanders solely.

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