

THE ROLE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

B. KEHM

University of Glasgow

Abstract

This contribution offers a definition of the field of higher education research and its relationship to the field of higher education didactics (i.e. teaching and learning). It then provides an account of the difficult relationship between the two in Germany and their respective institutional basis. However, it is also pointed out that the separation between the two fields is beginning to give way towards more cooperation and integration. This is followed by a look at the relationship between higher education research and higher education didactics in Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. In all of these countries, the two fields tend to separate each with a different institutional basis and a different organisation. Although the Bologna Process has contributed to a blurring of boundaries, it has also contributed to a higher importance being given to teaching and learning issues while at the same time PISA and related OECD studies have led to an 'empirical turn' in (higher) educational research. In this way, both fields are challenged and receive new inputs at the same time leading to more integrated and more internationally comparative approaches.

Keywords: Higher education research, didactics, teaching and learning, institutional basis, Bologna Process

1. INTRODUCTION

Until rather recently, the fields of higher education didactics and higher education research were two separate fields of study and scholarship in Germany. Centres for higher education didactics dealing with issues of teaching and learning in higher education institutions emerged from the late 1960s as centres for research and in-house staff development with the aim of improving teaching skills. On the other hand, centres for higher education research also emerged around the same time but were more clearly focused on producing research results relevant for policymaking. In the following contribution, I want to trace the history and relationship of these two closely related yet separate fields in Germany and a few other European countries, namely Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, as well as draw some conclusions and discuss potential future perspectives.

2. WHAT IS HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to answer the question 'what is higher education research', i.e. research about institutions of higher

education and about teaching and learning in higher education. Until today, there is no unified and commonly shared answer, except that higher education research is not a discipline but an object and problem related field of research drawing on theories and methodologies from a variety of mostly social science disciplines.

In an often-quoted attempt at a definition, Teichler (1996; 2005) has classified the themes and objects of higher education research into four larger areas:

- *Quantitative-structural aspects:* In this area we find questions of access and admission to higher education, higher education in elite and mass systems, diversification, types of higher education institutions, duration of study programmes, types of degrees, educational and occupational perspectives, income and status, advantages through investment in education and rates of return, adequate employment and mobility. Most commonly, economists and sociologists study these themes and questions.
- *Knowledge and subject related aspects:* In this area researchers study issues of disciplinary versus interdisciplinary approaches, general studies, academic versus professional focus of programmes, quality, competences and abilities, use of acquired competences in employment, over-qualification, relationships between teaching and research, curriculum development. Most commonly, researchers from education and didactics study these aspects.
- *People or teaching and learning related aspects:* In this area, we find questions of communication, advice, motivation, styles of teaching and learning, assessments and examinations, students and teachers. Most commonly, researchers in education, psychology and higher education didactics as well as sociology study these aspects.
- *Aspects of institution, organisation, and governance:* Among these issues, we find research on planning, administration, management and governance, power, conflict and consensus, decision-making processes, efficiency and effectiveness, funding and resource allocation. Key disciplines in this area are law, economics and business administration, public administration and political science.

Today I would add three further areas, which have manifested during the last few years:

- Technology transfer, the role of higher education institutions in their region, relationships between higher education and industry;
- Analyses about research, innovation and creativity;
- Rankings, evaluation, excellence, competition and elite institutions

The point to make here is that higher education research is very interdisciplinary and connects methodologies, theories, insights and knowledge from a broad range of different but dominantly social science

disciplines (cf. Clark 1984, Altbach 2002; Tight 2003; Pasternack 2006). Furthermore, macro analyses at systems level are often carried out in the form of international comparisons in order to gain insights into general and specific aspects within one or more systems.

However, two further approaches in the framework of which classifications of higher education research have been undertaken: science research and research about the relationships between higher education research, higher education policy and higher education practice. I will briefly introduce them here.

From the perspective of the history of science higher education research is a relatively young field emerging with a few publications in the 1960s and 1970s but which exploded in the 1980s. Schneijderberg et al. (2011: 8) summarised the development as follows:

Milestones [...] are the publications *Perspectives on Higher Education* (Clark 1984; USA), in Germany the book *Forschungsgegenstand Hochschule* (Goldschmidt et al. 1984), the encyclopaedia contributions on *Disciplinary Perspectives on Higher Education* introduced by Becher (1992, UK), and the work *How College Affects Students* by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991/2005, USA) which shaped research on students, the student experience and the impact of higher education on later life and careers.

These authors can be called the 'generation of the founding fathers' of higher education research. In the following two decades, a number of ground-breaking works and overviews consolidated the newly established field (cf. Neave & Teichler 1989; Kehm & Teichler 1996; Sadlak & Altbach 1997; Schwarz & Teichler 2000; Rhoades 2001; Gunkel et al. 2003; Brennan & Teichler 2008).

Becher (1989) and Becher and Huber (1990) looked at the "disciplinary approaches to higher education research" (Schneijderberg et al. 2011: 9) and emphasised the importance of the interplay between cognitive and social factors when – as in the field of higher education research – different disciplines and different individuals converge (ibid.). However, according to Schneijderberg et al. (2011) Anglo-American higher education research does not distinguish between discipline and field while German and French (e.g. Bourdieu) higher education research does. This has led to the fact that in the USA we find professorships with the denomination for higher education research while – apart from very few exceptions – we do not find such professorships in Germany and France for example, because in these countries professorships follow established disciplinary denominations and not 'fields' (ibid.: 10). These differences are indicators for the institutional basis of higher education research in the different countries and I will come back to this issue later.

In Germany, we find a distinction between discipline and field following Bourdieu. In this context, Bourdieu introduced the concept of “social space” (cf. Bourdieu 1975; 1985) having its own social structures and actor positions and into which researchers “import their symbolic capital, i.e. their individual prestige, accumulated in their disciplinary contexts” (Schneijderberg et al. 2011: 10). Thus higher education research is facing a double challenge: on the one hand it has to integrate the disciplinary approaches to higher education as an object of research; on the other hand the disciplines are important for the production, coordination and control of the knowledge about higher education (ibid.: 11).

I would now like to introduce the third approach to classification briefly. When UNESCO organised its first World Conference on Higher Education (1998 in Paris), Michael Gibbons (co-author of the famous book about The New Production of Knowledge with the concept of “mode 2 production of knowledge”; Gibbons et al. 1994) was commissioned to produce a background paper about the role of higher education institutions in the 21st century. In his background paper, Gibbons claimed that higher education institutions would lose importance if they did not pay a high amount of attention to three aspects: quality, internationality and relevance. Ever since then the humanities and social sciences in particular have been confronted with questions of their relevance, as has higher education research. As a problem and object related field that is strongly dependent on third party funding, higher education researchers have emphasised the relevance of their research for policy makers and practitioners. In this context, programme evaluations and research based policy advice are important activities. Research about governance and decision-making processes within higher education institutions and analyses about the quality of teaching and learning are also part of its relevance. In a book edited by Teichler and Sadlak in 2000 about the relationship of higher education research to higher education policy and higher education practice, Peter Scott emphasised the problematic and border crossing nature of the triangle of research, policy and practice (Scott 2000: 145f.). He also identified two basic models of articulation of these three elements: the European and the American model.

According to Scott (2000: 146):

The 'European' model of higher education research has a strong policy focus, in particular on developments at the macro level (national and system-wide policies). This model also tends to emphasize research contracts and consultancy, often on behalf of national policy-makers, rather than academic programmes, which tend to be weakly developed. The masters and doctoral programmes that do exist are secondary phenomena, mechanisms to provide research assistants.

In their article Schneijderberg et al. (2011: 11) also come to the conclusion that “higher education research is a relatively small and heterogeneous field of research in which the borders between research, evaluation and consultancy are fluid”.

In contrast to this,

The 'American' model has a much stronger practice focus, particularly at the meso-level (institutional improvement) and micro-level (academic practice). This model also has strong orientation towards academic programmes. Large-scale masters and doctoral programmes are offered which serve as a form of 'staff college' for academic managers. Research is much less policy-focused and more scholarly in tone, providing more analytical (and rhetorical) accounts of higher education (ibid.).

At the end of his contribution, Scott (2000: 147) summarises: “Complaints by policy-makers and practitioners about the quality or relevance of higher education research are evidence of that growing demand, not of the marginality of such research”. Scott even goes as far as demanding a “bold strategy” which seeks “to establish the study of higher education itself as the central discipline of the twenty-first century university” (ibid.).

I would like to leave it with this account of the different attempts at classification of higher education research and turn to another aspect, namely the institutional basis of higher education research in Germany, before delving deeper into the relationship between higher education didactics and higher education research and looking at the situation in a few other European countries.

Centres of higher education didactics were established at many German universities from the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s because of the late 1960s student movement and the increase in student numbers in the framework of higher education expansion as well as the accompanying critical debates about content of studies, development of study programmes and higher education reforms. Their task was a twofold one: carrying out research about teaching and learning and offering in-house staff development courses and programmes to improve teaching quality. Around the same time, the first higher education research units also emerged but were separate from the didactical centres. These units were mostly based on social science and political science approaches, with one exception – they were established outside universities as independent, extra-university research centres. Altogether six such centres were established between 1969 and 2005. However, while the community of didactics researchers and practitioners became relatively large and well organised – a national organisation was formed in 1971 and an international one (ICED, the International Consortium for Educational Development) in 1993 – the community of higher education researchers was seen for quite a while as being too small to merit a national organisation.

Instead, Ulrich Teichler from the higher education research centre at Kassel University initiated the establishment of a European based international organisation of higher education researchers (CHER, Consortium of Higher Education Researchers) in 1987 (cf. Kehm & Musselin 2013). Only after the year 2000 were national communities of higher education researchers deemed to have become large enough to merit a national organisation, at least in some European countries like Finland and the United Kingdom. Since 2006 there has also been a German language (Germany, Austria and German speaking parts of Switzerland) Association for Higher Education Research open for both higher education didactics researchers and higher education researchers.

The institutional basis of a field of research or a discipline is also expressed through journals, professorships, degree programmes and doctorates produced in the field. Due to the limited space of a journal contribution, it is not possible to go into all the details here (but cf. Schwarz & Teichler 2000). However, in both the fields of higher education didactics and higher education research, we can observe a growing discrepancy in recent years. While the number of study programmes at Masters level and the number of doctorates produced have increased in the field, opportunities for academic or research oriented careers have decreased, not least due to the closing down of most higher education didactics centres, some mergers and a growing destabilisation of some of the extra-university centres for higher education research. At the same time and due to recent steering and governance reforms in higher education, opportunities for careers in the middle management and upper level administration of higher education institutions have increased. Of course, such a development affects the potential clientele for new study programmes in the fields of higher education didactics and higher education research. Therefore, it is not surprising that the number of study programmes in the field of institutional management and science management have increased while research and didactics oriented programmes have decreased.

I would now like to provide a short sketch of the difficult relationship between higher education didactics and higher education research in Germany before looking at the situation in other countries.

3. HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AND DIDACTICS: A BRIEF HISTORY OF A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP IN GERMANY

In the early 1990s, when the author of this contribution became a scholar in the field of higher education research in Germany – there were no study programmes available in this field at that time in Europe – and looked for relevant networks and learned organisations, she made an interesting discovery. Higher education didactics was a strong field, well organised and well networked.



Higher education research was a small field and – at least in Germany – hardly any networks existed. Attempts to become a member in the relevant working groups and sections of the German Society for Education and the German Society for Sociology were quickly discouraged. Neither the theoretical approaches nor the main questions that were associated with higher education research seemed to fit. Here is an example: Pierre Bourdieu was the most prominent theorist in the field of higher education didactics at that time and the main question was “what are the determining elements of quality in teaching”? In higher education research, the most prominent theorist was Burton Clark and important research issues were structures and processes in higher education, the outcome and impact evaluation of European support programmes in the field of higher education and student mobility (e.g. ERASMUS). Appropriate networks could be found by becoming a member of the European Association for Institutional Research (EAIR) and the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER). In short, between higher education didactics and higher education research hardly any (content related) connection existed, even if individual people from both fields cooperated with each other occasionally.

At one point in time, this situation changed. It might be worthwhile to actually pinpoint the trigger for this change and analyse it, however, it can be assumed that already in the second half of the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s, higher education didactics began to be criticised and its outcomes and impacts questioned. Many higher education didactics units which had been established during the phase of German expansion of student numbers (from the end of the 1960s until the early 1980s) were dissolved, renamed or reorganised mostly into intra-institutional service centres without any research tasks. In contrast to this, higher education research became stronger concerning its institutional basis as well as (political) interest in its questions, its studies and in the production of young and promising new researchers in the field. From 2002 onwards, the first Masters level study programmes in the field of higher education research and science management and administration were established in Osnabrueck, Speyer, Oldenburg and Kassel. For the field of higher education didactics in Germany, Webler (2000; 2009a; 2009b) has attempted several times to provide overviews.

In 2006, the author of this contribution thought that the time had come for an attempt to unite the field of higher education research and higher education didactics in the framework of a new learned association. The German Society for Higher Education Research was established in spring 2005. It was an attempt to make both fields more visible and strengthen their negotiating powers in the face of potential funders of research projects and it turned out to be just in time. Because of Germany's bad results in the OECD PISA studies, the Federal Ministry for Education and Research had establish a large funding programme for educational research.

Originally, the education researchers with specialisations in school research were claiming more or less exclusive access to this programme. However, through a memorandum of the German Society for Higher Education Research to the Ministry arguing for access to the programme by higher education researchers the funding programme was opened to this group of scholars as well by adding a particular strand of funding for higher education research worth several million Euros every two years. Competitive bidding was the rule but due to the bad PISA results for Germany an “empirical turn” in educational research was introduced. Policy makers were looking for larger scale empirical research projects providing them with arguments for evidence-based policymaking.

At the same time another barrier broke down which had strained the relationship between higher education didactics and higher education research in Germany. Increasingly more often scholars in higher education didactics saw their field as a part of higher education research and no longer separate from it. Nevertheless, let us have a look beyond the German borders. I will come back to the situation described in this section in my conclusions.

4. ELSEWHERE

At the beginning of my research for this contribution, I was convinced that there were European countries in which higher education didactics and higher education research were less clearly separated than in Germany. I specifically looked at the situation in those European countries that had a visible higher education research community. To my great surprise, my assumption turned out to be wrong. Though my sample of countries is by far not exhaustive, everywhere I looked higher education research and higher education didactics had separate organisations, seldom cooperated with each other in joint research projects, and there is hardly any overlap in the bibliographies of published books and articles. For my look beyond the German borders, I have chosen Finland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Let us start with Finland, the country with the highest PISA test scores among its pupils.

Finland

There is a Finnish Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHERIF: Consortium of Higher Education Researchers in Finland) and a Finnish Association for Educational Research (FERA: Finnish Educational Research Association). The latter includes didactics and questions of teaching and learning.

For many years, all Finnish higher education institutions have a well-functioning quality management, which includes teaching quality. All study programmes have a Director of Studies who is responsible for the quality of teaching and who regularly communicates with teachers and students for this purpose.

If there are problems, the Director of Studies will immediately become active. The students regularly evaluate all their classes. Here again the Director of Studies takes immediate action in case of negative results. The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) organises a competition every two years in the framework of which departments can apply for the award of Educational Centre of Excellence. Selection criteria are:

- The mission of the unit
- Design of study programmes and modules
- Quality of teaching
- Quantitative and qualitative outputs
- Continuous further development (of teaching staff and of the curriculum)

Winners of the award, which is made very visible in public, also receive a substantial sum of additional funding.

The Netherlands

In the Netherlands there is no national association of higher education researchers, however, there is an expert network for higher education teaching (EHON: Expertisenetwerk Hoger Onderwijs), in the framework of which one particular working group discusses issues of professionalisation of teaching in higher education. In addition, the shift from teaching to learning which has been promoted by the European Bologna Reform Process is being piloted in a number of decentralised projects (cf. Clauß 2007). One project for example, called “the personal learning path” tries to develop a demand orientated steering of teaching, competence orientation, self-steering of students and the role of the teacher as coach. In principle, we are dealing here with a new configuration of roles and changed relationships of interaction. Teaching has a cyclical character and consists of four continuously returning phases, which structure individual modules as well as whole degree programmes. During the orientation phase, the discrepancy between existing and wanted competences is determined and learning goals are established (phase 1). In the planning phase, how the learning goals will be achieved is determined (phase 2). In the execution phase we see the implementation of planned activities (phase 3) and in the evaluation phase whether the discrepancy between existing and wanted competences could actually be reduced will be examined (phase 4).

The United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, we find two associations. On the one hand the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) which dominantly organises higher education researchers but is also open for scholars in the field of higher education didactics and debates about issues of teaching and learning.

However, the most important organisation for researchers in the field of higher education didactics is SEDA, the Staff and Educational Development Association.

As a practical example, I want to introduce the Oxford Learning Institute (OLI). OLI is a unit of Oxford University offering support for teaching and learning as well as for professional development of teaching. Offerings take the form of single seminars and workshops but also include more comprehensive professional development programmes targeting special status groups (e.g. institutional leadership, supervisors of doctoral theses, doctoral students, academic teachers, women, etc.) Apart from an administrative apparatus, OLI has three expert working groups: the professional development group (management, leadership and competence development), the educational development group (improvement of teaching and learning) and the research group (supporting and stimulating research about a variety of aspects in higher education).

Of course, we can find more examples and it might be worthwhile to study and analyse the issues in this contribution in a more systematic manner. However, I would now like to come to my conclusions.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

The new requirements for the organisation of teaching and learning in higher education institutions, which have been triggered by the Bologna reforms have also provided a new boost for higher education didactics in Germany. There continues to be a certain negative development regarding the stability of the institutional basis and higher education didactics have to meet the challenge of being increasingly turned into a pure service activity decoupled from research or losing its research function. However, there are also a number of opportunities.

With the Bologna Process, which started in 1999, the quality of teaching and learning has once again become a topic of public (and political) debate. In addition, when that is the case there is also funding for research available. In her survey among teachers at the University of Bremen carried out in 2002/03 Pötschke (2004) observed that the acceptance of teaching qualifications and the importance of teaching specific questions and debates had increased. A large scale survey among German professors (Schomburg et al. 2012) came to the conclusion that there clearly was a higher degree of openness among academic teachers for issues concerning the quality of teaching and learning and that – at least during term time – academic teachers spend more time on issues of teaching than was the case four years earlier. These empirical results also open up new roads for (empirical) research in the field of higher education didactics.

Here are just a few key words:

- Larger scale surveys on time spent on preparing teaching activities and views on the importance of teaching in relation to research. This topic also lends itself for international comparative approaches.
- Analyses regarding the development of competences and the assessment of learning outcomes
- Further development of standards and procedures of evaluation and accreditation
- Curriculum design in the context of Bachelor and Masters level study programmes, in the context of widening access and participation for non-traditional students and in the context of national qualification frameworks
- Development of appropriate recognition procedures for informal qualifications acquired outside higher education

In essence, the 'empirical turn' in higher education research and policy has challenged the traditional, more action research orientated and qualitative approaches that have characterised higher education didactics research in Germany. However, due to the two fields moving more closely together and starting to develop an identity of being a shared and common field rather than two separate fields of enquiry, new and innovative research questions can be developed jointly. These questions are not only relevant for basic research advancing higher education research as a field of knowledge but also for policy makers and practitioners providing them with potential solutions to current problems and answers to questions that are regarded as useful by the non-academic stakeholders.

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