The Globalisation Challenge for European Higher Education
Convergence and Diversity, Centres and Peripheries
Introduction

Challenges for European Higher Education: ‘Global’ and ‘National’, ‘Europe’ and ‘sub-Europes’

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This book addresses the globalisation and/or internationalisation challenge for European higher education from two cross-cutting perspectives: convergence and diversity, centres and peripheries. At this point, we cannot enter into the complex relationship between the concepts of globalisation and internationalisation; instead, we will focus on the double meaning the globalisation and/or internationalisation challenge for European higher education has had over the last two decades: as ‘globalisation in the true sense’ on one hand and as ‘Europeanisation’, i.e. “the regional version of internationalisation or globalisation” (Teichler 2004: 4) on the other. In this book, this “regional version” is brought to forefront without forgetting the former. However, we also do not forget that even ‘Europeanisation’ has a double meaning: Europe as a ‘global region’ (i.e., a perspective of ‘looking out’) vs. Europe as ‘European regions’ (i.e., a perspective of ‘looking within’).

I

A review of the state of the research field which formed the basis for the EuroHESC programme (Higher Education Looking Forward: An Agenda for Future Research – HELF) found that “there is limited comparative research on the extent of the differences between countries and the possibility of convergence via globalisation” (Brennan et al. 2008: 11). Research on these issues is therefore strongly needed; however, its approaches should be carefully reconsidered. First of all, new research should begin by recognising that “a single narrative or ‘idea’ cannot any longer capture the complex and often contradictory nature of higher education” today as it exists across different countries, “variations reflect different traditions and contemporary circumstances and contexts”. Further, the HELF report warned that these variations should not become “an excuse to descend into praise of the particular and the unique”; on the contrary, “An
understanding of the different things that higher education does is extremely important but the range of differences is not infinite, differences are bounded and they can be typologised in relation to both internal and external variables. And we should not rule out the possible existence of some unifying concept or concepts. A focus on difference may be a key route towards identifying and better understanding such concepts” (ibid.). This idea is shared by the authors of this monograph.

The relationship between ‘unity’ and ‘diversity’ – or ‘diversity’ and ‘unity’ – has been in the very front of contemporary debates on the ‘Europeanisation’ processes: both at a general level (e.g., as “a ‘European way’ to manage unity and diversity”, Olsen 2005) and in its particular dimensions, one of which affects and/or manifests in higher education (e.g. Haanes 2006, Amaral et al. 2009). Particularly after 1990, the general processes of ‘re-uniting Europe’ importantly challenged national higher education systems: in the given historical circumstances it seemed that parallel to the ‘national systems’ of higher education rooted in the 19th century there is a need for a ‘European system’\(^1\) at the turn of the millennium.

The policy dilemma – either a ‘united’ (‘harmonised’) ‘European system’ or ‘European systems’ as a ‘unity in diversity’ – was constantly reproduced over the next two decades, in one form or another and either consciously or unconsciously. Already at its inception it was not an easy dilemma. On one hand, it was provoked by the rapidly penetrating ‘globalisation’ and a fear of losing “a world-wide degree of attraction” or “international competitiveness”; on the other hand, it was an inner result of the ongoing “European process” and its “extraordinary achievements of the last few years” (Bologna Declaration 1999). The dichotomy of convergence and diversity, if we use other words to denote more or less the same issue,

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\(^1\) In paragraph 8, in the context of “international competitiveness”, the Bologna Declaration addressed “the European systems of higher education”. It is less known that a draft of the Declaration of 9 June 1999 contained at this point the term “the European system of higher education”. During the last round of negotiating the text, the singular was replaced by the plural in the first sentence of this paragraph; however, the plural remained unchanged in its third sentence. Interestingly, a wrong (i.e. draft) version is given at http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/about/BOLOGNA_DECLARATION1.pdf (the official ‘Bologna website’; last accessed 18 January 2013); this link is also replicated today on other websites, including the European Commission. For a proper reading the reader needs to look back to archives today.
has already been inscribed, e.g. upon the foundation of the Erasmus Programme (1986). The fall of the Berlin Wall a few years later, followed by deep political, economic and social changes in Eastern Europe, spread it further to the Tempus Programme (1990) which was established to extend the new European strategy in higher education across the former Iron Curtain. The _Zeitgeist_ called for the creation of more ‘unity’ in the European ‘diversities’; it was in this context that the political momentum was accumulated to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The process of ‘Europeanisation’ – understood here as a ‘European way’ to manage unity and diversity in higher education – has encountered a number of interpretations. Basically, they can be divided into two groups: conditionally speaking, they depend on approaching and observing ‘Europeanisation’ either as ‘globalisation’ or as ‘internationalisation’. From the point of view of ‘globalisation’ as the ‘levelling of the diverse’, higher education is considered as part of a global market system; within this perspective, there is no necessary connection between higher education and national development. In contrast, ‘internationalisation’ can only be considered as a process _inter_ nations. Yet, the discussion on ‘globalisation’ has proven that the issue is not so simple as the solution cannot simply lie in ‘joining the right side’. This levelling leads to eliminating all differences (and thus quality), while the difference in itself leads to autarchy. For example, international cooperation remains pure rhetoric if some convergence is not established between parties and a discussion remains a monologue until some ‘unifying concepts’ are set up. The relationship of convergence and diversity is driven by a specific dialectic. We need to establish ‘unifying concepts’ but – as mentioned above – only a focus on difference helps us to identify and better understand these concepts.

After two decades, European higher education still consists of national higher education systems; yet, some of them are more ‘globalised’ than others. Today, European national higher education systems look much more convergent than ever before but a cluster of new challenges is emerging: questions about the nature of the true potential of the EHEA and about the real impact of recent reforms across countries; questions about the aims and near future of European higher education etc. There is also enough evidence that a tension between ‘European’ convergence and ‘national’ diversities persists – and is perhaps even becoming exacerbated with its sharpening economic as well as political problems. The _Zeitgeist_ has obviously changed and today it seems to be closer to rehabilitating the European ‘diversities’
aspect than strengthening a perspective of European ‘unity’. Of course, this general change cannot remain without consequences for higher education. For example, the reduced funding for the Erasmus Programme – for the first time in its 25-year history – is just one of the signs of the depth of this change.

Different interpretations of the formerly ‘concerted’ pan-European policy (either in Bologna 1999 or in Lisbon 2000, or both) as well as diverse implementation processes at the national and/or regional level – enhanced by a mix of different discourses and the ‘local’ political and ideational pressures behind these processes – are now producing a new kind of European ‘divergence’. Here we come across another dichotomy, the dichotomy of centres and peripheries. It has not received much attention during the discussions of the last two decades; nevertheless, it seems that it can open up some new perspectives in understanding the higher education dynamic of the present decade.

It is obvious that today the EHEA is not a homogenous area – and that it cannot be. Changes in individual national systems influenced by the ‘Europeanisation’ and ‘globalisation’ processes, and the Bologna Process in particular, are having quite different impacts in various European countries and/or regions. On one hand, different qualities of e.g. ‘big’ and ‘small’ higher education systems demand adapted policies and specific actions. This cannot be interpreted as a necessary and inevitable contradiction of the ‘common policy’; only focusing on differences may help to identify and understand what is common. Moreover, the ‘common higher education space’ that was declared in 2010 after 10 years of ‘harmonised’ reforms in 49 countries of the continent is producing certain new tensions: e.g. in organisation of the system and its support institutions; the large imbalances in incoming and outgoing mobile students and staff; the ‘attractiveness’ of national universities in various countries etc.

On the other hand, it looks like an ‘invisible hand’ is pushing European countries to either accept roles of ‘policy exporters’ or ‘policy importers’. There is a strange incapability on the part of ‘peripheral’ countries to design their own national policies; instead, they are adopting and implementing recommended ‘common policies’ developed in ‘policy centres’ without taking the specifics of the ‘peripherals’ into account. Of course, there are

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2 E.g., quality assurance agencies in ‘small’ higher education systems can never achieve the critical mass that agencies in ‘large’ countries have.
many reasons for this; one of them is likely to be located in the very nature of the formation of the EHEA: the domination of the ‘common policy’ focus has led to “Bologna omnipresence” or “pan-Bolognisation” in contemporary European higher education discourses (Zgaga 2012: 30). This is just one of the reasons it is necessary to focus on differences again in order to reconceptualise a ‘unifying concept’ or ‘concepts’.

II

The chapters in this book are organised in three parts, with each part consisting of five chapters. Part 1 addresses some ‘front issues’: quality and mobility, convergence and diversity and policy ideas.

In claims about global challenges, the term ‘knowledge economy’ tends to be put forward to suggest that higher education across all countries is bound to be more strongly shaped by economic imperatives. Janja Komljenović and Klemen Miklavič depict the European Union as a strong advocate of a common European higher education policy in their article “Imagining Higher Education in the European Knowledge Economy: Discourse and Ideas in Communications of the EU”. Higher education policy statements by the European Commission have emphasised the importance of higher education for the economic future of Europe from the outset of the EU’s involvement in higher education policies since the 1970s, but the biggest policy early initiatives such as establishing the ERASMUS programme of student mobility in the 1980s and efforts to create a convergent pattern of study programmes and degrees in the Bologna Process – led by national governments since the late 1990s – have obviously pursued a relatively broad range of objectives without calling for a single and convergent major set of policy objectives.

The authors point out that the Lisbon Strategy was the major EU initiative of placing knowledge, and in this framework higher education, in the core of economic policy. In their critical discourse analysis of documents and their analysis of expert interviews undertaken, they argue that the EU aims at “causing the approximation of the academic sphere and the economic sector”: Europe’s answer to the global ‘knowledge economy’ should be an increase of expenditures on knowledge and greater efficiency, quality and ‘competitiveness’ in higher education. In the various EU statements (‘Communications’ etc.) since the year 2000, the “hitherto unfitness of European universities” is deplored: “They are portrayed as
ossified institutions that function in an old and outdated fashion rooted in the ideas and context of the 19th century”. The EU has advocated in its statements an increase in the institutional autonomy of universities that, if led by strong professionalised management and the desire to be responsive to external expectations, would enhance efficiency within the framework of economic rationales. The EU obviously considers the knowledge economy as a “central integrative paradigm”, generally being viewed as persuasive and inevitable, that is likely to create a widespread consensus among most actors involved. The “normative convergence” was viewed as being so strong that all national prerogatives and all alternative norms could be “elegantly circumvented”.

While the EU higher education policy in the framework of the Lisbon Agenda pursues a strong, controversial normative rationale of gearing higher education to ‘economic competitiveness’, a second internationally widespread objective of higher education is operational in its nature. An increase in international activities of higher education is generally held as inevitable and desirable, whereby a rise in international student mobility is the most widely shared operational objective in Europe and beyond. As Ulrich Teichler points out in “The Event of International Mobility in the Course of Study – the European Policy Objective” (i.e., the second chapter of Part I), quantitative growth of student mobility is the single most widely shared and most popular aim in the discourse on improving higher education across Europe. Quantitative targets became more ambitious in this respect with the ministers involved in the Bologna Process calling for an average rate of 20 percent of students across European countries spending at least a semester of study or study-related work experience in another European country by the year 2020. This quantitative target implicitly suggests that outbound mobility for the purpose of acquiring first-hand international experience of life and study in another country is the highest aim in Europe – more important than maximum figures on the hosting of students from other countries.

The great popularity of increasing border-crossing student mobility seems to be based on the belief that student mobility is beneficial with regard to a broad range of educational and societal goals. The value of study in another country might comprise ‘learning from contrast’, a more reflective personality, successfully taking up visible international work tasks and generally the enhancement of professionally relevant competencies which lead to more successful careers. Surprisingly, though, as Teichler
points out, this widely shared objective is not accompanied by concerted efforts even to create basic statistics in order to identify the magnitude of student mobility. For example, the figures on foreign students and study abroad have served as approximations for estimating mobility, i.e. border-crossing for the purpose of study, and many countries continue not to register short-term mobility, i.e. the most widespread mode of intra-European student mobility. The author points out that inward mobility to Europe from other regions of the world has grown substantially in recent years – often for the whole degree programme and often motivated to experience a higher quality of teaching and learning abroad than at home and to enhance one’s academic competencies. Intra-European mobility, in contrast, seems to be growing moderately, is undertaken predominantly for a period of study and to partner universities of a similar quality as that at home, whereby inter-cultural understanding and ‘learning from contrast’ is more likely to be expected than superior academic quality.

Competition for the establishment and preservation of select high-quality universities is widely held as the third global imperative for higher education. Ellen Hazelkorn and Martin Ryan point out in their article “The Impact of University Rankings on Higher Education Policy in Europe: A Challenge to Perceived Wisdom and a Stimulus for Chance” that the higher education policy discourse in Europe has substantially changed since ‘global rankings’ of universities have been published. While criticism of the methods and validity of information was widely voiced, concern spread notably among advocates of the Lisbon Agenda to strengthen higher education and research in order to make Europe economically most ‘competitive’.

One tended to believe that too few higher education institutions in Europe “are recognized as world-class in the current environment of research-oriented global rankings”. The view spread that the quality of a higher education system largely depends on the concentration of potential in a few top institutions, whereas earlier higher education policies, based on the belief of higher education as a public good serving broad cultural and social objectives, had favoured a similar level of quality among most higher education institutions. Hazelkorn and Ryan analyse policies in France, Germany and the United Kingdom; they note a smaller impact of the ranking discourse in the United Kingdom because substantial quality differences between institutions had already existed and were widely accepted. The authors argue that rankings did not trigger a completely new
debate but “accelerated and intensified” what was often called a “modernisation agenda” of higher education. Finally, they point out that measures taken to support the outstanding situation of a few top universities cannot lead to rapid changes and that their impact can only be measured validly after a while.

The European discourse on “world-class universities” can be viewed as one of the various calls for the diversification of higher education systems. In the fourth chapter of this section, in her article on “Diversification in Austrian Higher Education: A Result of European or National Policies?” Elsa Hackl shows that this only addresses one feature of diversification. Over the years, “the need to diversify European higher education has been one of the persistent topics of European policy makers” and, in this framework, a broader range of possible dimensions of diversity has been addressed.

Diversification has been a topic across European countries since the 1960s, whereby differentiation among institutional types was advocated and often implemented initially while the focus shifted over the years towards diversification among individual universities of higher education. In her case study of Austria, Hackl shows that national policies were justified as following European trends and imperatives even if they did not closely follow the dominant trends. The establishment of Fachhochschulen and thus “differentiation for practice relevance” was not realised in Austria before the 1990s. “Diversification for competitiveness” was not pursued through policies directly shaping the patterns of higher education, but via reforms of governance starting in 2002: “Through detachment from the federal administration and legal autonomy the universities ought to be provided sufficient scope of action and entrepreneurship”. Finally, the third policy step, that of “diversification for excellence” has for a few years appeared more in tune with policies in other European countries; yet it seems too premature to ascertain that the newly established “Institute of Science and Technology – Austria” is on its way to becoming a “world class university”. Thus, the author convincingly shows that European policy discourses on higher education are influential in individual European countries even though the European countries are not clearly headed towards convergent solutions.

The fifth chapter of the first part of this book also addresses the impact of European policy discourses as regards the need for more diversified higher education systems on national policies and actual developments. Manja Klemenčič analyses in her article “The Effects of Europeanisation on