

### How do universities compete?

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Competition in higher education is ubiquitous. Universities worldwide compete for reputation, financial resources and talent in many different arenas (Krücken 2019). They compete for world class (Shin and Kehm 2013), public funding (Brewer et al. 2001; Fischer and Wigger 2016; Mayer 2019), third party funding, students (Jongbloed 2004; Marginson 2006), doctoral students (Taylor and Cantwell 2013), as brands (Drori et al. 2014), in economic models (Fraja and Iossa 2002), in rankings (Wedlin 2011; Espeland and Sauder 2016), for accreditation (Alajoutsijärvi et al. 2015) and so on. But competition not only takes place between organizations; nation states compete to have world class universities (Rust and Kim 2013) and individuals compete for reputation and jobs (Hamann 2019).

While omnipresent in the discourse and analysis of higher education today the random list of competitions above also highlights that precisely this pervasiveness of the term makes it unclear. Higher education policies across countries have constructed universities and their subunits increasingly as competitive actors (Krücken 2017; Musselin 2018) but how this competition takes place is difficult to observe. How do we know that the political imperative of competition actually leads to a process of competition? How can we observe competition taking place?

Competition thus generally comes with a backstory. In most cases it is connected to the assumption of higher education as markets. For example, by reframing degrees as “positional goods” and students as “consumers” in market terminology, higher education is transformed into a demand-supply curve for which competition is a logical consequence. On campus, in classes and in research work such curves are much more difficult to find. This applies likewise to the range of field theoretical approaches. In correspondence analyses of higher education institutions, field theory values distinct but common practices as resources and capital in order to assume a dynamic and competitive positionality among the units it projects. Thus to make competition work, an enormous amount of disciplinary and abstract imagination is necessary.

It is considerably easier to derive competition from rankings, seals, competitive funding schemes or from newspaper articles. Third parties have become important as referees or distributors of scarce goods or status for which universities and their subunits compete (cf. Simmel [1908] 1992: 328; Werron 2015). The list, the color, the narrative over time allow for competitive changes. Yet, their retrospective and static assumption of competition should not be taken at face value. Rather it would be necessary to focus on interactions and negotiations between competitors and third parties to reconstruct competition in action.

Another way to analyze competition is through self-descriptions (Kosmützky 2012; Taylor and Morpew 2010; Mitterle et al. 2018), expert interviews, or senate protocols (Mayer 2019). Through these, actors themselves can speak and act, highlighting that universities do see themselves as competing. Such written self-rationalizations are however fluid, fragmented, and difficult to scale. One day it is public finance, the next day it is the struggle against funding cuts among disciplines or – as often in mission statements – a comparative is evoked without naming the competitor.

Given the centrality of the competition-imperative in higher education today, understanding how competition operates is central to grasping contemporary dynamics in higher education that increasingly lack a coercively defined hierarchy. The question “How do universities compete?” thus aims at addressing three distinct but interrelated topics:

- Can we, and if so, how can we observe competition actually taking place?

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- How can we analytically grasp competition in higher education without subjugating it ex-ante to one-size-fits all theoretical frames?
- How do the multiple expressions of competition relate? Do they merely coexist or do they interfere with each other, and if they interfere, what are the effects?

We invite papers that address one or more of the raised points in their research. This comprises approaches that empirically investigate competition in process (case studies etc.) or such that engage in problem-sensitive theorizing of competition in contemporary higher education.

The panel will be submitted as part of the Knowledge Politics and Policies Section of the conference. Please send brief paper proposals (max. 500 words) by February 10, 2022 to Tim Seidenschnur ([tim.seidenschnur@uni-kassel.de](mailto:tim.seidenschnur@uni-kassel.de)), Alexander Mitterle ([alexander.mitterle@soziologie.uni-halle.de](mailto:alexander.mitterle@soziologie.uni-halle.de)) and Roland Bloch ([roland.bloch@zsb.uni-halle.de](mailto:roland.bloch@zsb.uni-halle.de)).

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