

# The Palgrave International Handbook of Higher Education Policy and Governance

Edited by

Jeroen Huisman

Harry de Boer

David D. Dill

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Policy and Governance

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# Preface

As a field of study, higher education is receiving increasing attention from scholars, not only from the community of what Teichler (2000) terms theme-based and applied higher education researchers who traditionally have seen this field as their turf, but also increasingly from scholars who are strongly embedded in the social sciences disciplines and that have started to discover that higher education is a 'suitable' field to test their theories or to explore concepts and phenomena of their interest. The Bologna Process is a case in point, in that political scientists have used this phenomenon in higher education to explore aspects such as multi-level governance and Europeanization. In addition, management scholars appear to engage more and more with issues that play out in higher education, such as leadership, marketing and organizational change.

In one way or another, one could argue, all higher education themes that have been investigated so far are related to policy and/or governance. This is not surprising, for in many higher education systems, governmental policies are still a major driver for change and dynamics taking place in higher education systems and their organizations. Whether one discusses access to higher education, global rankings of higher education institutions or quality assurance, ultimately questions are raised – and should be raised – about the role that governments play. Who is responsible for setting the rules for the game, for holding institutions – public and private – responsible for their outcomes and performances, for fair access and so on? If it is, in the end, not the government that is directly responsible, governments eventually have – implicitly or explicitly – a significant role in deciding on who will be responsible.

A couple of decades ago, a focus on higher education policy would have sufficed, but we argue that it is now important to broaden up and include governance issues when looking at higher education. In a context in which governments were in the driving seat, a focus on policy seemed warranted. Policy should, in this context, be understood as the (political) decisions for implementing courses of action to reach certain societal objectives (see, e.g., Cochran and Malone, 1995), with policy instruments figuring as the tools of these courses of action (see Chapter 3 by van Vught and De Boer). But as several scholars – from political sciences and public administration – have argued, looking at policy solely would narrow our perspective on the issues at stake. Undeniably, stakeholders beyond governments are playing an increasingly important role in higher education (as they do in other [semi-]public and even in private sectors), and other mechanisms – including those of the market – have gradually been introduced. Enter governance, defined as 'a change

in the meaning of government, referring to a new process of governing; or a changed condition of ordered rule; or the new method by which society is governed' (Rhodes, 1996, pp. 652–653, see also Chapter 2 by Reale and Primeri).

This Handbook aims to present the state-of-the-art research on higher education policy and governance. It brings together key conceptual, theoretical and methodological insights and contains contributions on topics that figure prominently on governmental and other stakeholders' agendas, such as funding, research and development, gender and graduate employment.

A few caveats must be kept in mind when reading this volume, one of which we explicitly would like to address in this editorial introduction. As for any handbook, there is not sufficient space to address all salient concepts, methods and themes. Readers may wonder why certain themes and theories have been addressed and others ignored. This partly goes back to the way we took up this challenging project, through an open call for contributions. We tried to make our selection of chapters as representative as possible, also bearing in mind geographical coverage of the themes. That call was, after an initial selection of solid proposals, complemented with some explicit invitations to contributions. In all, we think we offer a rather comprehensive set of 30 chapters that address a vast range of exciting concepts, methods and themes. The concepts addressed are those that dominate the current discourse and debates on higher education, and the themes relate to overarching topics that are equally salient and pertain to enduring governance challenges.

Acknowledging the above caveat, it is even more important to celebrate the rich diversity that lurks behind the overall idea of higher education policy and governance. Embarking on the project, we thought that it made sense to distinguish concepts, methods and themes. We still think it does but emphasize the blurring boundaries between them. We were aware that a watertight distinction between concepts and theories, for instance, may be untenable, in that they are inextricably connected: theories use concepts, although some higher education concepts are 'theory light'. Similarly, it was not always easy to distinguish themes from theories: Is regionalism a theme or a theory (Chapter 20 by Chou and Ravinet)? But other demarcation challenges loomed. Should one see the network approach (Chapter 12 by Shields) as a method or should it have been included under the section addressing concepts? And, is institutional research (Chapter 11 by Webber and Calderon) a specific method or a theme?

If we look behind the functionalistic division, there is even more variety. Some themes are much more 'mature' than others. Chapter 29 (by Burke and Kuo) and Chapter 30 (by O'Connor, Carvalho, Vabø and Cardoso) show that considerable attention has been paid to inequalities in higher education over the past decades, whereas Chapter 19 (by Fevolden and Tømte) makes clear that research, despite a tradition of investigating online learning, has only started to scratch the surface when it comes to exploring new developments like open

educational resources. The distinction between mature and less mature themes coincides to some extent with whether a significant body of literature has developed, leading to a robust understanding of the phenomenon. In a similar way, we see less and more mature theories, concepts and methods. Policy instruments go back a while (Chapter 3 leads us back to the seminal work on policy instruments of the 1950s), whereas the idea of multi-level governance (Chapter 5 by Fumasoli) is much more recent. In that sense, presenting the state of the art is a significant challenge. Therefore, in this Handbook, chapters can be conceived of as stock-taking exercises, showing the reader what we know and do not know (yet), whereas in other chapters it seemed more appropriate to introduce and explore relevant underlying concepts. Some themes lend themselves easier than others for developing a particular theoretical perspective or for giving input in terms of a new or revised research agenda. A final point regarding variety – not unimportantly in light of our comment on higher education as a growing field – is that we are pleased to see that chapters have been contributed by seasoned scholars and as well by a new generation of higher education scholars.

As said, the objective of our endeavour was to compose a broad overview of the current state of higher education and governance studies to inform and inspire those interested in the field. It has been an interesting and rewarding journey, and we are confident that this objective has been reached, but obviously success and failure are in the eyes of the beholder!

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