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Tackling the multi-actor and multi-level complexity of European governance of knowledge: Transnational actors in focus

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Abstract

This special issue is one of the first systematic attempts to map and investigate relevant transnational actors in European knowledge governance, highlighting the differences and commonalities in their structures, identities, and roles, as well as the links in which they are embedded, and the influence they can exert in knowledge policy formation. The introduction sets the stage for five empirical contributions focusing on different types of actors – an expert group, two university alliances, three student unions, the academic associations, and an advocacy coalition of individuals with strong institutional positions in one national science policy system. It provides an overview of various theoretical perspectives informing these studies, explores connections between them and discusses implications for a future research agenda. The introduction demonstrates how transnational actors matter for the European governance of knowledge, and calls for a cross-fertilization of different disciplinary perspectives, in particular comparative politics and organizational sociology, as a way forward.

Keywords

Transnational actors, multi-actor governance, multi-level governance, interest groups, meta-organizations, higher education, research, knowledge

Background and relevance

The construction and on-going integration of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) have reshaped the European governance of knowledge policy domains, *i.e. domains related to higher education, research and innovation*, and how this process plays out in more organised network configurations (Kjaer 2009). The emergence of a European layer beyond the nation state has added further complexity in the governance of knowledge and its multi-level endeavour (Piattoni, 2010). For some, different sets of governance chains across local, regional, national and European level have been set in motion (Moos & Wubbels, 2014). Others see the creation of a new policy space in education as an example of how the EU constructs multiple arenas to coordinate diversified actors and engage appropriate agencies and elites in relevant policies (Lawn, 2011).

Scholars have also focused on the tensions that have emerged with the addition of the European governance layer in higher education, research and innovation. This includes vertical tensions between actors at different governance levels (e.g. the European Commission creeping competence in the area of higher education, Trondal (2002)), as well as the intensification of already existing horizontal tensions between actors from

different sectors, such as higher education, science and technology, and innovation (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014). Apart from such multi-level and multi-sector challenges to coordination, the increasing involvement of non-state actors at the local, national and European levels has further increased complexity in the European governance of knowledge. Participation and influence of non-state actors in governance reflects what Piattoni calls the state-society dimension (2010). It adds a multi-actor aspect to the multi-level one (Chou, Jungblut, Ravinet, & Vukasovic, 2017) and a 'transnational flavour' to already existing supranational and intergovernmental dynamics (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014).

In this context, it is thus relevant and urgent to study transnational actors as particular organizational and network forms emerging and thriving in the European arena (Kjaer 2009, (Ball & Junemann, 2012; Pataki, 2015). To do this, it is necessary to analyse such actors in a way that allows for highlighting the differences and commonalities in their structures, identities, roles, as well as the links in which they are embedded, and the influence they can exert on decisions related to knowledge policies.

Indeed the distinctive power and resources of European transnational actors are related to their geographical, economic, and political proximity to the EU institutions (Lawn & Lingard, 2002), but, we argue, it is an empirical issue to understand how such power and resources play out in decision-making in general, and development of policies in particular. Against this backdrop, this special issue aims to map and to investigate relevant transnational actors in European knowledge governance. It does so by presenting five empirical cases – an expert group, two university alliances, three student organizations, the academic associations, and an advocacy coalition of individuals – that provide a fine-grained analysis of the dense latticework of collective actors, their roles, linkages and positions which form the European governance of knowledge. Drawing from these in-depth cases, we aim to contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms at work in the making of European knowledge policies.

The overarching research questions addressed in this special issue are:

1. How can transnational actors in European higher education, research and innovation, be conceptualized?
2. What role do transnational actors play in European knowledge policy processes?
3. How are they embedded in the European governance structures? How do they connect to other actors and processes in the European knowledge policy arenas? What are the factors empowering and constraining such links?
4. What are the implications of such engagement(s) on the governance of knowledge and on the structure of the EHEA and ERA?

Each of the five papers in the special issue focuses on European transnational actors and coalitions striving to influence both the processes and outcomes of knowledge policy-making. These include the European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQFAG); the European university Association (EUA) and the League of European Research Universities (LERU); the European Students' Union (ESU), the Erasmus Student Network (ESN) and the European Students' Forum (AEGEE); the European academic associations; and, finally, an advocacy coalition of individuals, with strong institutional positions in the Swedish science policy system and actively engaged in European research policy making.

All contributions draw upon Europeanization and EU studies, multi-level governance and institutionalist perspectives, as well as higher education and research policy studies. They also combine a number of relevant theoretical concepts and perspectives including policy networks, advocacy coalitions, interest groups and intermediation, meta-organizations, stakeholder theory, world polity theory and professionalism. By combining these concepts and perspectives, the aim of this special issue is to shed light on the characteristics, roles, division of labour, involvement, and influence of transnational actors in European knowledge governance. Equally, the special issue provides an empirical analysis of the related issues of democratic representation, mobilized expertise and legitimacy. Finally, through the lens of insider-outsider actors in policy processes, or the centre-periphery dichotomy, the articles provide an illustration of how the Europe of Knowledge is structured with unequal participants and unequally distributed resources (Fumasoli, Gornitzka, & Leruth, 2015).

The contributions comprising this special issue have been presented at various international conferences, including annual meetings of the European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) and Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER). A dedicated workshop was hosted in May 2016 by *ExCID (Expert cultures and institutional dynamics: Studies in higher education and work)* a research group at the Department of Education, University of Oslo (Norway) to mainstream the different contributions into a coherent whole.

The following sections elaborate on the notion of transnational actors, provide an overview of the relevant theoretical perspectives and briefly present each paper. As a conclusion, we revisit the overarching research questions formulated above and outline a research agenda.

Transnational actors – what are they, how can we study them and why do they matter?

For the purposes of this special issue, we characterize transnational actors as *collective non-state actors whose identities, organizational structures, mandate, scope and embedding go distinctively across (European) national borders*.

Transnational actors in their various forms have thus far been subject to various disciplines and theoretical strands within social sciences, including international relations, comparative politics, policy analysis, organizational sociology and educational research. Their role has also been explored in connection to European integration, in particular with respect to the multi-level governance context and the role of experts. The following provides key concepts and insights from these research strands and relates them to transnational actors in European governance of knowledge.

European integration entails, amongst other, the creation of an additional governance layer beyond the nation state. This results in decision-making taking place across several governance levels – European, national, regional, local – and involving multiple actors, including various EU institutions, national, regional and local authorities as well as non-state actors (Eising, 2004; Piattoni, 2010). Such a *multi-level governance* context does not necessarily imply a neat division of jurisdictions; in the case of the EU it can result in various tensions (Chou & Gornitzka; Fumasoli 2015) and overlaps (Börzel, 2010; Hooghe & Marks, 2003). Such tensions can be detected also between what some refer to as governance processes – organized heterarchies of actors embedded in various network forms, and governing processes – which are? more legalistic and hierarchical policy implementation structures (Kjaer 2009). All contributions to this special issue have embedded their analysis in the context of multi-level governance, focusing on relationships between actors at different governance levels and implications of such relationships on the outcomes of policy processes.

A related and equally fundamental concept in the overarching analytical framework of this special issue, *multi-actor governance* requires considerations of both organizational and political aspects. As the contributions of Vukasovic & Stensaker and Klemenčič & Palomares illustrate, operating across governance levels is often coupled with a nested organizational structure, e.g. local or national non-state organizations operating domestically are members of a European association that, in this context, is considered a transnational actor. This nested organizational structure brings forward an important organizational feature – many transnational actors are effectively organizations of other organizations. In other words, European transnational actors can be *meta-organizations* whose basic characteristics – membership, decision-making processes, policy positions, as well as the status and strategies vis-à-vis other actors – are fundamentally different compared to organizations whose members are individuals (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). This results in a complex dynamic affecting core attributes of both the meta-organization and its members, such as their legitimacy and status in their relevant policy arenas, their policy agendas, internal organizational structures and processes, as well as strategic positioning towards other state or non-state actors.

Many of the transnational actors that are in the focus of this special issue are actively involved in policy-making at the European level, very often on behalf of their members, as can be read in the articles by Vukasovic & Stensaker on university alliances, Klemenčič and Palomares on students' unions, and Fumasoli & Seeber on academic associations. As such, they constitute *interest groups*, an increasingly important channel for articulation of public interest in modern democracies (Richardson, 1995). On the demand side, policy-makers seek the involvement of interest groups because these can provide valuable policy resources, such as information, expertise and political support (Bouwen, 2002). On the supply side, interest groups are given the mandate by their members and constituents to represent them towards policy-makers at various levels of

governance and lobby for their policy preferences (Beyers, Eising, & Maloney, 2008). In the European context, given the concerns about the EU's democratic deficit (Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2007), the participation of interest groups is seen as a promise of increased legitimacy and transparency of the EU, and this also goes for European initiatives in higher education, such as the Bologna Process (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014; Vukasovic, 2017; Yagci, 2014). However, participation of interest groups can also be a pitfall if access to EU policy-makers is limited to only a handful of groups and if the groups themselves do not faithfully represent the interests of their members (Binderkrantz, 2009). One of the key characteristics of interest groups is their status in the European policy arena. The literature distinguishes between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Insiders are organizations that have been recognized by policy-makers as partners in the policy process and are engaged in direct lobbying. Outsiders are organizations that do not have access to the relevant policy arena, so their lobbying strategy is indirect and relies on public pressure and the use of media (Beyers et al., 2008).

Apart from interest groups, individual experts as well as their intermediary bodies are also involved in European knowledge policies. While reliance on experts has been the hallmark of European governance since the early days of the EU (Gornitzka & Holst, 2015; Gornitzka & Sverdrup, 2008, 2011), in particular due to its institutional and issue complexity (Zahariadis, 2013) and to its original focus on industry and technology sectors, the increase in knowledge production over time and the focus on knowledge economies has further strengthened the importance of experts in policy-making processes. However, with such growing involvement of experts – providing advice but also taking decisions themselves – come also concerns over legitimacy and effectiveness of these new governance arrangements, and the extent to which knowledge is being politicized (Gornitzka & Holst, 2015). Such concerns point to the questions about who participates as an expert in policy processes concerning knowledge, what institutional arrangements support their participation and what are the implications for policy outcomes. In this special issue, Elken's and Persson's contributions each focus on different aspects of expert involvement, including modes of participation and institutionalization of European level expert groups, as well as the role national intermediary bodies play in forming coalitions across borders and governance levels for developing long-term financial and institutional commitments, such as the European Research Council.

Weaving these different perspectives, this special issue contributes to the on-going debate, in the *European Educational Research Journal* and elsewhere, on the shifting relationship between governance and knowledge, and on how new actors influence the processes and outcomes of decision-making within the field of education (Delvaux & Mangez, 2008). The individual articles focus particularly on how transnational actors position themselves in the more networked forms of governance that have emerged in Europe during the recent decades. While much research suggests that European policy processes within education are driving national policies of standardization through various forms of evaluative and measurement techniques (Brady & Bates, 2015; Ozga, 2012; Ozga, Dahler-Larsen, Segerholm, & Simola, 2011), the contributions in this issue emphasize how transnational actors are trying to influence the formation of policies, and how their distinctive involvement implies nuancing the standardization thesis.

Overview of the individual articles

The European Qualifications Framework Advisory Group (EQFAG) is analysed by Mari Elken, who sheds light on the conditions conducive to organizational stability and legitimacy of a key actor in European knowledge governance. Elken's study shows that, while the EU constructs policy arenas to be filled up, actors profit from room to manoeuvre and flexibility with regards to their new roles. Decrypting the process of institutionalization of the EQFAG, Elken highlights that European arenas can (also) act as opportunity structures for policy entrepreneurs, highlighting the vibrant dynamics at play in the European governance of knowledge.

Martina Vukasovic and Bjørn Stensaker compare two university alliances – EUA and LERU – focusing on how diverse membership bases (i.e. comprehensive vs. selective) and diverse resources lead to somewhat differentiated roles and representation of interests in European policy-making. While both alliances have rather easy access to EU decision-makers, the bases for their legitimacy are different, affecting their positioning as well as the breadth and ambiguity of interests they advocate for. This contribution offers a fine-grained analysis of actors, linkages, and processes at play in governance of knowledge at the European level.

Looking at three European student organizations (ESU, ESN, AEGEE) Manja Klemenčič and Fernando Miguel Galan Palomares investigate the conditions determining insiders and outsiders in European knowledge policy processes. Their paper shows how legitimacy plays a major role in accessing EU institutions and policy processes, even when organizational structures and resources are similar. These findings are particularly relevant for understanding how the EU grapples with and filters the complexity of multi-level and multi-actor environments, selecting actors it deems legitimate.

Tatiana Fumasoli and Marco Seeber provide a mapping of European academic associations, focusing on their missions, structures and positioning. Their findings articulate a nuanced landscape where traditional scholarly associations coexist with socially orientated academic associations. Equally, their paper offers an insight into the different patterns of centre-periphery structures from a geographical, political and resource perspective. The quantitative analysis points to the coexistence of traditional and innovative academic organizations with varied levels of access to European institutions.

Finally, Bo Persson investigates the role played by key Swedish science policy actors in the process of building the European Research Council (ERC) in 2000s. The paper shows how national policy actors have leveraged on their organizational capacity and legitimacy to contribute to European agenda setting and policy formation. Importantly, the paper shows how national policy actors are able to do this partly through bypassing their own state authorities, thus becoming embedded in the European policy arena.

Towards a research agenda on European transnational actors in knowledge governance

The in-depth analyses provided in this special issue show how European transnational actors can be conceptualized and compared according to their mandates and missions, organizational structures and decision-making processes, through their linkages to the EU institutions, the levels and types of influence in policy making, and their position in the broader arena of European knowledge policies. These characteristics can be seen as the outcome of policy design, of strategic intent, but also as the result of incremental and organic changes. Along this line, we have provided an illustration of how transnational actors transform depending on changing constellations of actors, processes and outcomes around them.

The individual articles have also pointed to the importance of expertise, legitimacy and representation. This leads to the characterization of the European governance of knowledge as an evolving, dynamic space where not only constraints but also opportunities abound. In this respect, this special issue contributes significantly to the scholarly debate on new organizational forms, new governance actors and arrangements concerning education policy in Europe (Ball, 2009; Pataki, 2015).

Another key finding of this special issue is the variety of roles actors play in decision-making processes, for example by providing expertise and legitimacy (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014). This is illustrated by Elken concerning the institutionalization of the EQFAG, by Vukasovic and Stensaker in their analysis of alliances and university associations, by Klemenčič and Palomares on students' organizations, and by Fumasoli and Seeber in their study of academic associations. While these actors do not have monopoly on expertise, they do have characteristics that enable them to be seen as legitimate players at European level. Their legitimacy also paves the way for another role often undertaken by the actors studied, that of the agenda-setters, able and well positioned to articulate their interests also at European level (Richardson, 1995).

However, our special issue not only confirms earlier findings, but also expands them by identifying other roles taken on by the transnational actors involved in European governance of knowledge. One such role is related to the top-down arrangements that sometimes characterize the European governance of knowledge, and is related to how decisions are followed up and turned into implementation processes in which both professional and civic actors take part. This role is noted by Vukasovic and Stensaker, and by Klemenčič and Palomares, who show that university and student associations are also provided with economic resources to carry out political decisions at European level. Equally, Elken shows that European governance of knowledge can develop also in a more organic way, where emergent actors (like the EQFAG) are increasingly entrusted a role in policy implementation, a role which they originally were not envisaged to have. This special issue, specifically the contribution by Persson, also identifies a bottom-up process in which a coalition of national

actors takes an active role in shaping both European policies and institutions, acting partly autonomously from their own national authorities.

Yet another role detected among the transnational actors involved in the European governance of knowledge is that of being a recruitment arena for the new policy professionals. This is particularly visible in how students' associations produce policy talent that may later transfer to other policy actors. This role should not be underestimated, as it provides a mechanism for diffusion of European scripts and for sustaining European governance arrangements in the long run.

Hence, we show that transnational actors undertake multiple roles that are quite closely interrelated, and that the acquired expertise and legitimacy engender new roles and opportunities in the European arena. Whether all of these expanded roles always contribute to decreasing the democratic deficit in Europe is perhaps more questionable (cf. Kohler-Koch & Rittberger, 2007).

The multiple roles identified also suggest that the linkages between various policy actors can acquire different forms, and that it is possible to identify some of the factors empowering and constraining such links. One important factor is organizational capacity: we have seen how several European transnational actors are meta-organizations, which sometimes find it difficult to establish themselves as strong collective actors (Ahrne & Brunsson, 2008). An important feature enabling their integration (and thus their survival), is a professional secretariat capable of engaging in numerous policy events and opportunities at European level, and acting as the node between policy actors. The fact that a number of university alliances, student organizations, and academic associations have established their own secretariat in Brussels, shows how proximity with EU institutions is pursued, but also points to the possibility that such policy networks may act increasingly autonomously from their membership basis (cf. Klüver & Saurugger, 2013; Kohler-Koch, 2010). In spite of limited empirical findings in this respect, the various articles nevertheless suggest that such professional secretariats are important enablers of influence in European governance of knowledge.

Policy linkages are also dependent on other factors, such as legitimacy. Here we can also see indications that transnational actors sometimes join forces and, build on their own legitimacy, develop common policy positions and drive specific policy developments. An example of such alignment is the functioning of the so-called E4-group – consisting of the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA). These four transnational actors have developed – at least on some issues close mutual links related to specific joint activities, not least with respect to the further development of European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance (see the article by Klemenčič and Palomares). Bringing together experts and various stakeholders in a structured way can, as Elken demonstrates in her study, be a powerful way to align actors and create a common vision for further policy development. In order to confirm that this is the outcome of European deliberate design aimed to coordinate actors and enhance elite groups (Lawn 2009), further empirical research is warranted.

Turning to the implications that such complex transnational actor constellations have for the European governance of knowledge, we argue that this special issue has shed light on one of the key disputed themes: - the issue of complexity versus standardisation. While several studies suggest a correlation between European policy developments and increased standardisation (Brady & Bates, 2015; Ozga et al., 2011), we contend that the empirical findings offered in this special issue resonate more with those strands of research problematizing such a direct relation. Indeed, the policy dynamics in the Europe of Knowledge are complex and far less predictable in their overall implications (as suggested by e.g. Maassen & Olsen, 2007; Piattoni, 2010). Several articles in the special issue address – directly and indirectly – the issue of standardisation by studying policy content, the framing of policy processes, and the emergence of specific formal structures, all of which suggests that a more nuanced stance would be necessary. Factors that contribute to this complexity include the number of actors involved, the ways they are involved in the policy process and their capacity and/or willingness to engage in the issues at hand. In this respect Fumasoli and Seeber show that while some academic associations have become more socially relevant and accordingly more connected to European actors and policy processes, several more seem to remain quite isolated from the shaping of policies in the Europe of Knowledge. This could indicate that many academics in different disciplines maintain boundaries between their scientific activities and European policy processes and cherish their autonomy. Hence, while expertise and legitimacy could be considered requirements to access and influence policy processes, we

suggest that organizational structures, resources, identities and decision-making processes of these transnational actors need to be scrutinized further. The latter point implies that insights from comparative politics and organizational studies might be combined into a valuable framework for studying European governance studies in general, and that we need more studies in this area if we are to understand the governance of the Europe of Knowledge.

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