Purposive design or ecology? A critique of teleological perspectives on internationalisation in higher education

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1 THEORISING INTERNATIONALISATION

Internationalisation of higher education can be understood as the expansion and integration of the higher education field across borders, implying a growing interconnectedness of the involved actors on a global scale. It is then crucial to understand the nature of such actors, including their position, their capacity for engaging with the field, as they move within the field between centre and periphery; new actors emerge and old actors disappear. Basic questions on internationalisation point to the number and quality of such relationships, that is, their density, sustainability, actor resources and institutional contexts.

This special issue contributes to ongoing research on developments in the field of higher education; notably, research focusing on how organisational actors influence changes and the stability of the field (Lepori & Fumasoli 2010, Fumasoli & Huisman 2013, Fumasoli, Stensaker & Vukasovic 2018, Fumasoli, Barbato & Turri 2020). The higher education field is broadly conceptualised as a latticework of links between actors that look at each other while moving to the centre of the field and seek to eventually control its rules (Fligstein & McAdam 2012). To be able to analyse the academic field, one needs to consider three dimensions: first, organisational actors pursue their distinctive interests engaging with the rules, resources and representations within the field. Second, such actors pursue their objectives rationally, but are also affected by their ideological, cultural and social identities. Third, interconnections between actors in the field are established across different levels of analysis and, accordingly, by different types of actors. Analysing internationalisation of higher education means capturing this variety within an appropriate conceptual framework.

In the last three decades we have undoubtedly witnessed sustained internationalisation in higher education, through student and staff mobility, joint degrees, offshore campuses, internationalised curricula, research cooperation on a larger scale (de Wit & Altbach, 2020). More recently however, and even before the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020, the sustainability of the different forms of internationalisation has started to be questioned. Scholars have challenged internationalisation primarily on grounds of economic sustainability, risk management and imbalanced relationships between wealthier and poorer countries and higher education institutions. This has been particularly the case for universities in English-speaking countries and universities operating in English that have carried out internationalisation agendas to increase their revenues.

The apparent crisis of internationalisation in higher education has been mainly explained as an outcome of variants of growing nationalism (e.g. restrictive visa policies); and more recently,

by the concrete barriers to traveling imposed by the global pandemic. The various studies that have emerged seem to point to a potential turning point for internationalisation, but do not engage with a broader analytical framework in which descriptions of ongoing events are developed into more theoretical explanations. Such explanations are needed if we aim to shed light on broader phenomena and change dynamics in higher education. Against this backdrop, this special issue argues that analytical tools are required not only to better describe and understand the events and trends as they happen, but also to embed our observations in a theoretical framework that allows for a broader perspective, in which the conditions and consequences, as well as the mechanisms, of such changes in higher education can be related to, and resonate with, larger transformations in contemporary societies.

It is broadly recognised that internationalisation in higher education is connected to globalisation and represents the way the higher education sector has adapted to external competitive pressures (Fumasoli, 2019). Globalisation can be broadly defined as the increasing integration on a global scale of economic relationships, as countries, organisations and other actors link to each other according to economic rationales. This framework implies, on the one hand, that, if the economic rationale for internationalisation falters, internationalisation will decrease its speed, maybe even stagnate and shrink. On the other hand, the identification of an economic rationale and the subsequent gains, e.g. revenues of market shares, would imply that all sorts of actors engage with internationalisation. However, economic links, once established and further institutionalised, carry with them political, social and cultural meanings. Hence, seeing internationalisation exclusively as an economic phenomenon, hampers a thorough understanding of the complexity of its inner dynamics that start to operate when economically driven partnerships are established. In other words, internationalisation can be understood only by considering a variety of factors, actors and relationships that, together shape an ecological system, rather than a purposive design.

2 INTERNATIONALISATION AS AN ECOLOGY, RATHER THAN A TELEOLOGY

Internationalisation and globalisation can be conceptualised on a continuum between none at all and fully achieved. While concrete examples of the opposite abstractions will most probably never be observed, decades of expansion have led some to think that there is a primary way forward—albeit at times prone to slowing down—towards a significantly internationalised higher education sector. This is not to say that internationalisation has not been criticised; in fact, it is often connected to marketization, capitalism, economic expansion and competition on a global scale from which only some countries and institutions, as well as elite students, can profit (e.g. Bamberger, Morris & Yemini 2019).

Systematically and analytically taking into consideration the complexity of the ongoing changes in the academic field will also help avoid the methodological fallacy of selections based on dependent variables (Geddes 1990). The fallacy of *selecting on the dependent variable* takes place when we select a case of internationalisation and we reconstruct its causes backwards. This neglects how, under similar conditions, in other cases internationalisation did not take place. Thus, another ambition of this special issue is to provide a more complex analysis of internationalisation by assuming the diversity of actors' imperatives, positions and capacity within an ecosystem of actors embedded in social structures that shape their capacity, their connections and resources.

Each of the articles in the first thematic part of this issue contribute in part to responding to the following question. While internationalisation has been observed emerging and thriving in so

many cases, why has it not happened in other contexts? To grasp the complexity and variety of ongoing phenomena in higher education, Lee and Stensaker offer a conceptual article demonstrating that a more fine-grained analysis and a more systematic approach is needed to understand internationalisation as a mirror of societal changes that are comparatively less homogenous and linear. Akbaritabar and Barbato use network analysis to outline the co-authorship landscape in higher education studies. They illustrate the consolidation of this field of knowledge and present some counterintuitive findings on internationalisation. Similarly, Fumasoli and Rossi's study of hundreds of cross-border networks of innovation offers some original insights on the particular roles universities play in large multi-actor European consortia.

Addressing the emergence of a powerful new type of actors, Horta and Feng present an innovative study on intermediaries in global higher education markets; namely, education recruitment agents. The booming supply and demand for higher education has expanded the academic field to such an extent that a significant market share has been taken over by agents who procure students in particular to Australian and UK universities, and increasingly to North America and Europe. Kosmützky and Woelhert present an analysis on how national funding schemes significantly affect the institutional characteristics of international collaborative research projects.

The tensions and paradoxes that higher education institutions have experienced while engaging in internationalisation are another key theme in this special issue. This is particularly visible in the case of the European Research Area (ERA) analysed by Veiga. Academic ideals of cooperation clash with political imperatives of competition, shaping a contradictory narrative of the ERA and its main objectives. Similarly, Yemini uncovers the incongruities of the Israeli effort to address the UN Strategic Development Goals, presenting itself as a global innovation powerhouse, while disregarding the challenges related to the intractable conflict within its territory.

The three contributions from early career researchers offer a qualitative, micro perspective on internationalisation, which helps uncover actor motives and identities. Khan originally presents a qualitative systematic review of European brain drain that points to higher education policies and academic careers across the continent as a possible explanation for migration patterns to North America in particular. Schaefer looks at doctoral students' experiences of mobility to disentangle the dynamics of European horizontal integration. Finally, Dyred Pedersen reveals the mechanisms leading to internationalisation within a traditionally nationally oriented field of knowledge.

3 IN THIS ISSUE
The first article in this issue, *Research on internationalisation and globalisation in higher education –Reflections on historical paths, current perspectives and future possibilities*, is by Jenny J. Lee and Bjørn Stensaker. They address the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education as intertwined and complex phenomena that have attracted the interest of higher education scholars for several decades. Lee and Stensaker offer some reflections on how research on internationalisation and globalisation has developed over the years and the perspectives that appear to have dominated these studies. A key argument is that while the field is, in many ways, booming—both in the numbers of publications and with respect to topics explored—whether substantial theoretical advances have been made is questionable. Many publications still tend to be quite descriptive with shallow observations, mostly on reporting national trends and political agendas. As internationalisation and globalisation undoubtedly

will continue to make an impact on higher education in the years to come, there is a need for a stronger theoretical basis, which can underpin future studies. The current article discusses potential future advancements enabling a more integrated, theoretical grounding for understanding and interpreting internationalisation and globalisation in higher education in the years to come.

In the second article, *The futures of cooperation in European governance: Brexit and the European knowledge policies*, Amelia Veiga analyses how the concept of cooperation is articulated in higher education governance discourses in Europe. Veiga uses UK's decision to leave the EU, *Brexit*, to highlight different meanings of cooperation. A secondary data analysis of ten case studies was undertaken in the framework of an exploratory research project titled *Brexit and higher education in the UK and Europe: Towards a cross-country investigation*. The presentation of the conceptual analysis is structured using scenarios for European cooperation articulated in the European Commision's Europe 2025 agenda. Veiga contends that the different meanings of cooperation associated with the different scenarios of cooperation jeopardise the future of cooperation driven by academic values and beliefs. Veiga notes that an analysis of cooperation as a driver of the internationalisation of higher education raises questions to the role of national policies; specifically, the extent to which national policies are open to European cooperation or are more nationally oriented and "closed" to cooperation.

Next, in *Varieties of collaboration: On the influence of funding schemes on forms and characteristics of international collaborative research projects (ICRPs)*, Anna Kosmützky and Romy Woehlert analyse funding schemes in Germany for identifying different forms of international collaborative research projects. A description of the characteristics and forms of ICRPs and the impact of funding conditions on ICRPs in the social sciences and with external project funding is presented. The findings draw on desk-research and a review of research on the relationship between funding and international research collaborations. The analysis used a conceptual perspective that understands research projects as temporary organisations to discuss characteristics of ICRPs and funding conditions for ICRPs. Kosmützky and Woehlert systematise and differentiate forms of ICRPs by four attributes: (1) size, (2) geographical distance, (3) funding structures and (4) funding formats. In the discussion section, implications for future research and practice are elaborated.

In the fourth article, *Understanding the role of higher education institutions in international networks of innovation in teaching and learning: the case of the Erasmus+ programme,* Tatiana Fumasoli and Federica Rossi investigate how higher education institutions connect to other organisations in their own sector and in wider society—a topic that has been the focus of several studies addressing strategic partnerships, stakeholder management, engagement activities, research, industry and business collaboration among others. One aspect that has remained quite neglected is the role higher education institutions (HEIs) play within these networks in relation to the network objectives, governance and division of labour, size and funding. The article presents analysis on a dataset of 900 European networks promoting educational innovation funded by the *Erasmus+* programme between 2014 and 2019. It uncovers the distinctive functions universities carry out in multi-actor multi-level transnational networks and illustrates the conditions under which HEIs lead, facilitate, connect and simplify collaborative work. Fumasoli and Rossi analyse how higher education institutions contribute effectively to transnational networks, and how HEIs contribute to our understanding of

universities as unique organisational forms that provide both a platform for enabling collaboration among heterogenous actors and a background for innovation.

The fifth article, *An internationalised Europe and regionally focused Americas: A network analysis of higher education studies*, by Aliakbar Akbaritabar and Giovanni Barbato analyses the internationalisation of higher education studies by looking at collaborations in the form of international co-authorships. They examine how network-based mechanisms, related to structural relationship between authors in terms of preferential attachment, and node level features in terms of homophily, affect higher education co-authorship networks. They propose an effective methodology for disambiguating the names of research organisations and analyse data on 17,262 publications from 33 specialised higher education journals indexed in Scopus from 1996–2018. Scientific collaboration in higher education mainly occurs within national borders with 90% single-country publications. Akbaritabar and Barbato find that the two largest communities of research collaboration are characterised by different thematic foci and represent research from (1) Europe, Asia and Oceania and (2) the Americas. The latter community presents a greater frequency of research on teaching and learning whereas policy studies are comparatively more common in the former.

Miri Yemini unravels Israel's narrative to tackle the Sustainable Development Goals in the sixth article, *Internationalisation by demarcating the role of higher education in Sustainable Development Goals: The case of Israel.* An analysis of documents is carried out for outlining the public discourse on the engagement of the State of Israel with SDG implementation in higher education. Unique characteristics of SDG implementation in Israel associated with the position of a high-income country involved in a geo-political conflict are discussed. Yemini highlights discrepancies between the potential role of higher education in implementing the SDGs and the role of higher education as articulated by the state and public discourse. Two significant discrepancies are found: first, the complete absence of Israel's national conflict in the discourse on SDGs reflected in formal documents published both by the state and by Israeli NGOs. Second, the misalignment between the structure and function of higher education in Israel in terms of internationalisation strategies adopted and the specific role ascribed to higher education within the SDG discourse.

Next, in *Brokers of international student mobility: The roles and processes of education agents in China*, Hugo Horta and Siyuang Feng explore the role of Chinese education agents in international student mobility The behaviours and reasoning, the modus operandi, and positioning of education agents providing fee-based services for facilitating the admissions processes to universities overseas are analysed using agency theory. A focus of the analysis is information-asymmetric relations between service providers and customers; the latter are referred to as principals and are represented both by individual students and universities. The findings demonstrate a mix of transparent and comparatively opaque practices that border to unethical practices in international university admissions services. Student dependence on service providing agents operating free from accountability is observed. Private education agents are identified as contributors to socioeconomic reproduction in international higher education.

In a globalizing world, international mobility is valued for the career development of academics and researchers. However, Jawaria Khan argues, in *European academic brain drain: A meta-synthesis*, that increasing academic migration from Europe represents a problematic brain

drain. Quantitative studies have failed to explore the in-depth reasons behind brain drain. Through a synthesis of qualitative literature over two decades (2000–2020), this article presents a new perspective of the root causes of European academic brain drain. After careful examination of the qualitative literature, five factors are found to be responsible for the outflow of human capital. These include: (1) attractive salaries outside Europe; (2) short-term fixed contracts for early career researchers; (3) unfair recruitment procedures; (4) attractive migration policies and (5) the indirect role played by internationalisation policies to encourage permanent mobility.

The ninth article, *Horizontal Europeanisation among mobile doctoral candidates in the context of the European Union and the European Research Area* examines Europeanisation; that is, the deepening of European integration. Gregor Schäfer uses a micro perspective for analysing horizontal Europeanisation among early-career academics. The article draws on findings from a qualitative interview study with 60 doctoral candidates from Germany. Horizontal Europeanisation as a concept represents a perspective in which Europe and the European Union (EU) are populated by individuals, who are actors of European transnationalism. The process of horizontal Europeanisation among early-career academics is explored and discussed against the background of EU's efforts to develop a common scientific market and European Research Area (ERA). The findings show that the EU and ERA contribute to the processes of horizontal Europeanisation and support it. However, many decisive factors for horizontal Europeanisation lie beyond the framework of EU policies and the ERA. A particular contribution of this article is that it provides micro-level insights on the mobility of early-career academics in Europe.

The tenth article, *Mobilising international student mobility: Exploring policy enactments in teacher education in Norway*, by *Tea Dyred Pedersen*, analyses the internationalisation of higher education through student mobility practices in three Norwegian teacher education programmes. Drawing on interview data, this article explores the perceptions and practices of student mobility as understood and described by students, faculty and administrators. Findings show that mobility is mainly understood in terms of its relevance for students' future teaching practice, but that this understanding competes with academic and bureaucratic purposes. These different understandings were observed to contribute to tensions in mobility practices both in terms of faculty and staff engagement, as well as student demands. Pedersen's analysis suggest that policymakers need to give more attention to (1) programme-specific and more general contextual factors that influence mobility in practice and that (2) the preconditions for internationalisation vary across higher education contexts.

4 PART II

Part II opens with an article by Ulrika Haake and Charlotte Silander, *Excellence seekers, pragmatists, or sceptics: Ways of applying performance-based research funding systems at new universities and university colleges in Sweden*. This article reports on a study that examined the use of performance-based research funding systems (PRFS) at seven universities in Sweden. The findings draw on an analysis of key documents and interviews with 38 participants representing different levels of leadership. Interviews were carried out from 2013 to 2017. The study sought to understand the impact of national and university level PRFS policies; in particular, the structure of PRFS and motives for applying PRFS. Haake and Silander identify higher education institutions by three types that represent different approaches to the use of performance-based funding: (1) *excellence seekers*, (2) *pragmatists* and (3)

sceptics. Findings demonstrate that national incentives, models and measures influence decisions at lower institutional levels to a limited extent. The findings contradict ideas according to which performance is underpinned by an assumption of rationality, and challenge beliefs according to which steering funding to those who perform the best will automatically produce more and better research.

The last article by Andreas Behr, Marco Giese, Herve D. Teguim Kamdjou and Katja Theune, *Motives for dropping out from higher education—An analysis of bachelor's degree students in Germany*, deploys hierarchical cluster analysis for identifying reasons for drop-out among bachelor's degree students in Germany. The data analysed was collected in a national panel study, *the National Educational Panel Study* (NEPS) from 2011 to 2016. Findings from the analysis of dropout motives by student characteristics, by university type, by field of study and by a number of background factors demonstrates that the dropout decision was based on a variety of reasons, rather than a clear single motive. The most important reasons for leaving university without a degree were in this study observed to be mainly related to interest and expectations concerning study programmes as well as aspects associated with student performance.

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