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Research on Internationalisation in Higher Education

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This contribution provides an overview of the developments of research undertaken since the mid-1990s on international higher education. The general state of research is characterised by an increase of theoretically and methodologically ambitious studies without a dominant disciplinary, conceptual, or methodological “home.” The main topics of research on internationalisation in higher education reach from mobility, mutual influence of higher education systems, and internationalisation of the substance of teaching and learning to institutional strategies, knowledge transfer, cooperation and competition, and national and supranational policies. The modes of inquiry are varied but have not changed much over time. A brief localisation of the role of the Journal of Studies in International Education in the context of research about internationalisation in higher education is followed by conclusions emphasising a certain amount of continuity but also a broadening of the field with an increasing number of ambitious studies. The contribution closes with a few proposals for future research.

Keywords: *higher education research; internationalisation; mobility; institutional strategy; internationalisation of substance*

On the way toward a knowledge society, increased public attention is paid to higher education, the most visible sector of systematic knowledge generation, preservation, and dissemination. Naturally, systematic information on higher education is also increasingly called for as a basis for understanding and reflections of possible ways of improvement. Thus, research on higher education has become a more respected area of theme-oriented, interdisciplinary research in many countries than it was one or two decades ago. In its thematic priorities research on higher education responds strongly to actual developments of higher education and related public debates. This allows us to conclude that research on the international dimensions of higher education has also substantially grown in recent years.

Authors' Note: This article is largely based on a literature review undertaken by Annika Ufer, a doctoral candidate at the International Centre for Higher Education Research Kassel, in cooperation with the authors.

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However, any attempt to gather information on the state of systematic knowledge with regard to the international dimensions of higher education is hampered by the fact that research in this domain is not easily accessible. The thematic area is somewhat fuzzy, as will be discussed below, and therefore cannot easily be addressed through the typical strategies of literature research. Also, research reports and reflective thoughts are often published or otherwise distributed in ways that require enormous efforts to get hold of them. There are no major research institutions and libraries that can claim to collect documents in this domain in a more or less comprehensive way.

This contribution aims to provide an overview of the developments of research undertaken since about the mid-1990s on the international dimension of higher education. As this period was characterized by a growing relevance of international aspects for higher education, we might call systematic analyses in this area as “research on internationalisation of higher education.” To provide such an overview, an extensive literature search was undertaken. We know that the information actually collected remains restricted to a search focused on accessible books and journals and primarily included publications available in the English language. The review covered roughly the period since a well-received overview article on the state of research in this domain was published (Teichler, 1996) and since the *Journal of Studies in International Higher Education* was established (1997; i.e., the best available mirror of achievements of research on internationalisation of higher education).

THE GENERAL STATE OF RESEARCH

First, there was obviously a substantial *quantitative growth* in the number of analyses on internationalisation of higher education. Although Over (1996) had to undertake considerable efforts to collect a list of about 500 relevant titles, it is easy today to present a comparable list of thousands of texts.

Second, analyses on internationalisation became a *more visible component of general publications on higher education*. We recently note a substantial number of special issues on the international dimensions of higher education in journals addressing higher education. An analysis of the journal *Higher Education*, the well-established international journal of higher education, pointed out that “internationalisation” of higher education has become one of the key thematic areas only since about the mid-1990s (Teichler, 2005).

Third, we note an emphasis on internationalisation of higher education, in particular among those *publications targeting the practitioners and policy makers* in higher education more strongly than the higher education researchers. For example, there is an increasing number of policy-driven studies that are located somewhere between research and politics (e.g., evaluation of elements and instruments of internationalisation). This is supported by the fact that a growing number of institutions

and researchers take up the issue of internationalisation in higher education who are not particular specialists in that field. Together with the shift of actual internationalisation strategies, policies, and activities from a marginal to a central issue in higher education institutions, we can surely speak about a “mainstreaming of internationalisation” (Hahn, 2004, p. 123).

Fourth, compared to the beginning of the 1990s, when research still assumed that internationalisation could be clearly demarcated (cf. Teichler, 1996), research on internationalisation in higher education today tends to be *more closely linked to other topics* (e.g., management, policy, funding, etc.), thus causing an increasing “fuzziness” or multidimensional character of the topic itself that is especially characterised by unclear demarcations of concepts. This “fuzziness” is, however, not treated with an adequate number of attempts at clarification, conceptualisation, or definition.

Fifth, the close linkage between research on this theme and other themes, which causes this “fuzziness,” obviously is a consequence of *a growing importance of the international argument (i.e., internationalisation as a “priority” issue), a growing interest in international comparison, and a growing focus on macro policies and processes of coordination*. Or, in reverse, the proportion of literature addressing more or less exclusively international aspects of higher education has declined.

Sixth, systematic analyses on the international dimension of higher education became *more complex*. Many recent studies do not merely address student mobility or merely internationalisation policies of higher education. Rather, links between various internationally oriented activities are scrutinized. These activities might be mobility, knowledge transfer, cooperation, international education, and so on, so basically we are dealing with institutions, people, and knowledge as the core of internationalisation in higher education.

Seventh, internationalisation in higher education tends to be treated as *a highly normative topic with strong political undercurrents*. This can be observed by the unspoken rivalry of certain values. On the one hand, internationalisation in and of higher education is regarded as something positive and important. Almost all higher education institutions refer to their international dimension in mission statements and in formulations of their profiles. On the other hand, internationalisation is embedded within a national value system, which—in the face of growing competition—implies that studying is better done at home. Finally, internationalisation also reflects the existing international inequality between nations and world regions because about three fourths of the world mobility is vertical.

Despite the stated trend toward a mainstreaming of internationalisation in higher education in general and the resulting fuzziness of the issues for research, we can observe a certain number of specific *shifts of the leading themes* in research about internationalisation that have emerged since the mid-1990s. In his contribution to *Higher Education*, Ulrich Teichler (2004) pointed out the following shifts of themes:

- From internationalisation to globalisation.
- From the information society to the knowledge society and modes of knowledge transfer (e.g., information and communications technology [ICT], mobility, export of programmes).
- From recognition as an estimate of equivalence to more detailed measurements of quality and validation.
- From structural variety to homogeneity or even convergence.
- From administration of mobility to strategic action and systems steering of internationalisation.

Teichler, however, argued that the shift of dominant themes does not mean a phasing out of the old themes. Rather, the diversity of themes seems to increase, whereby the new themes are more likely to be in the limelight of public attention.

The close link between research agendas and policy debates and the substantial proportion of policy-driven pragmatic publications in this domain do not suggest that research on the internationalisation of higher education has stagnated as far as its theoretical foundation and methodological sophistication are concerned. We notice an *increase of theoretically and methodologically ambitious studies*. However, this has not led to the emergence of a dominant disciplinary, conceptual, or methodological “home” of research on internationalisation in higher education. We do not return to the situation about two decades ago when we could observe in the United States a clear dominance of cultural anthropology and intercultural learning as reference research fields and a clear dominance of student mobility as the thematic area. Rather, as issues of internationalisation are viewed as more complex and as more intertwined with other issues, research on internationalisation of higher education is bound to draw from research of a broad range of disciplines and thematic areas.

In looking at authors addressing the international dimension of higher education, we often find references to persons such as—in alphabetical order—Philip G. Altbach, Jane Knight, Peter Scott, Ulrich Teichler, Marijk van der Wende, and Hans de Wit. In the more recent literature, we note references to a broader range of experts, for example, in Europe to Ivar Bleiklie, Ase Gornitzka, Barbara M. Kehm, and others. We should bear in mind, though, that research on the international dimension of higher education continues to be more widespread in the United States and there is more broadly based on the “shoulders” of many experts. The dominance of persons from other countries in the above list is to some extent because of the fact that research on the international dimension of higher education is based in most other countries on a small number of experts in this domain.

MAIN TOPICS

Research about internationalisation in higher education is to a high extent dependent on external funding. There are only a few researchers who continuously engage

with the issue and have made it their field of specialisation. There are even fewer centres or institutes that have internationalisation of higher education as a core theme of their research activities. Thus, political events such as, for example, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) negotiations or the Bologna Declaration tend to trigger numerous externally funded studies and affect the research agenda. Another factor influencing the research agenda are large conferences or overview publications of international organisations—for example, the first UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education in 1998 or two major Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) publications, titled *Internationalisation of Higher Education* (OECD, 1996) and *Internationalisation and Trade in Higher Education* (OECD, 2004).

In screening a broad range of publications of the past 10 years of research and studies on issues of internationalisation in higher education, we identified seven broad themes. Although these themes naturally branch out into a number of sub-themes, they might be viewed as characterizing the thematic landscape of systematic studies in this domain:

- Mobility of students and academic staff.
- Mutual influences of higher education systems on each other.
- Internationalisation of the substance of teaching, learning, and research.
- Institutional strategies of internationalisation.
- Knowledge transfer.
- Cooperation and competition.
- National and supranational policies as regarding the international dimension of higher education.

Mobility of academic staff and students continues to be very much in the foreground of studies and analyses. Widespread subthemes are mobility flows and statistics, impact of mobility on careers, recognition of study abroad, vertical and horizontal mobility, recruitment and selection of international students, support structures for international students, organisation and funding of study abroad, and “virtual mobility” with the help of ICT.

Analyses concerning *mutual influences of higher education systems on each other* have been recently influenced by issues of globalisation and trade in educational services. Competition and the formation of strategic alliances have become stronger. Through the export of study programmes or the establishment of branch campuses abroad, academic cultures of one country are introduced in another. But there are three other aspects of mutual influences that can be found in the literature: (a) the higher education system (or elements of it) of the United States as an example to be adopted (with appropriate adaptations) in other countries (e.g., the model of the graduate school), (b) the convergence of the European higher education systems on the basis of the Bologna reform process, and (c) the relationship

between developed and developing countries. It can also be noted that many European countries have broadened their perspective considerably to include more often also world regions other than the United States.

Internationalisation of the substance of teaching, learning, and research has become more important during the past decade. Relevant systematic studies cover a broad variety of aspects ranging from attempts at definition to analyses of practice. Among the major subthemes, the following are worth mentioning: internationalisation of curricula, quality of international programmes, internationalisation at home, the role of foreign language knowledge and teaching and learning in a foreign language, and joint and double degree programmes.

Institutional strategies of internationalisation make up a sizable amount of publications and have become an increasingly important theme. Various studies underscore a growing emphasis on marketing, profile building, active and selective recruitment of foreign students, and export of programmes. Partners for exchange and cooperation are selected more carefully and according to strategic and competition-oriented considerations. There is a strong indication that high-quality educational provisions have become a business that—at least in some countries—is a factor in the generation of institutional income. Rankings and quality issues also have become more prominent in this context. Still, the most thorough comparative study undertaken in Europe (Huisman & van der Wende, 2005) warns that just a superficial glance on the public discourse can be misleading. Careful analysis suggests the existence of a much broader and less fashion-driven variety of programmatic thrusts. Major subthemes of analyses in this area are (strategic) management of internationalisation, networks and partnerships, and marketing of provisions for international students.

The theme of *knowledge transfer* has gradually become more important during the past few years and often serves as an underlying rationale in debates about the role of the university in the knowledge society. It is basically analysed in the framework of three perspectives. The first perspective is the on-the-job utilisation of knowledge acquired during the course of studies. In this perspective, the call of the Bologna Process to modernise and reform curricula in such a way that graduates are “employable” is one facet addressed by various studies carried out in recent years. Graduate surveys addressing the professional relevance of acquired knowledge and competences often cover the impact and relevance of study abroad as well. The second perspective is that of the contribution of higher education research to often national but increasingly often also international innovation systems. The third perspective has become more prominent in the context of transnational education, namely the export of programmes, the growth in worldwide virtual provisions, the establishment of branch campuses abroad, and the franchising of higher education provisions. Important subthemes are the new production of knowledge, changing knowledge regimes, the impact of international learning, “employability” of internationally experienced students, and mobility of programmes (rather than students).

Cooperation and competition is one of the overarching themes that is being treated in many publications as having an impact on national and on institutional strategies. National policies are developed to make a given higher education system more attractive to foreign staff and students. And in the face of growing national and international competition for resources and best talent, higher education institutions have started to become more selective in their choice of partners. In fact, most of the studies and analyses dealing with this theme speak about a shift from cooperation to competition, although strong competitiveness is usually accompanied by strategic alliances with selected partners. Subthemes often addressed are networks and strategic alliances, brain drain, brain gain and brain circulation, and marketisation of higher education.

Analyses of *national and supranational policies* for the internationalisation of higher education are an ongoing theme that frequently comes up in the relevant literature. Although the term *globalisation* suggests an increasing erosion of borders and of the traditional idea of the nation-state, available analyses confirm that national policies continue to play an important role. Notable is an increase in studies on policies of international and supranational organisations and their impacts on institutions or national higher education systems. Conceptualisations of Europeanisation, internationalisation, and globalisation are closely related to this issue (e.g., Bologna and GATS), as are interpretations of the relationships between higher education institutions in developing and developed countries. Key subthemes in this area are European cooperation and integration processes, the impact of GATS, “glonacal” approaches in higher education, policies of various supranational organisations active in higher education (World Bank, UNESCO, OECD, European Commission), governmental policies regarding the internationalisation of higher education, dynamics of national and global competition, and multilevel governance.

APPROACHES, CONCEPTS, AND METHODS

For more than a decade, research on the international dimensions of higher education has been a thematic area *drawing from a broad range of disciplines and research domains*. We certainly have indications that particular approaches and concepts became more popular in this area very recently, such as neo-institutionalism or other approaches of policy analysis, network theories, and discourse analysis. Altogether, the enormous diversity of approaches stands out rather than certain priorities.

Modes of inquiry did not change substantially over time. We note studies based on literature review, analysis of documents, interviews, and questionnaire surveys. Some studies are based on a broad range of modes of inquiry, whereas others are dominated by a single way of collecting information. We notice a substantial number of studies that might be called case studies covering various programmes, institutions, actors, and countries.

As studies about the international domain of higher education by definition address various countries, it is not easy to place them *geographically*. Certainly,

however, major components of research address international dimensions and links of higher education in the United States, supranational activities within Europe with respect to higher education, and internationalisation of higher education in Australia—a country with a fast growth of foreign student enrolment. One has to be cautious, however, because most literature reviews such as the one on which this analysis is based almost exclusively refer to literature available in the English language. We might estimate, though, that *the majority of studies on internationalisation are not available in the English language* and that we cannot be sure that the literature available in the English language is really representative for the overall available systematic information on international aspects of higher education. Apart from the English-speaking countries, many authors in this domain from small, economically advanced countries often publish in English, but we are certain that a majority of publications on this thematic area from authors in countries such as China, Russia, Japan, Germany, and France and from authors in the Southern European and Latin American countries are not available in the English language.

Research on internationalisation of higher education obviously addresses issues of higher education beyond national boundaries. This does not mean, however, that we would consider all analyses in this domain as comparative. *Comparative analyses* form the minority of studies available (i.e., studies explaining similarities or differences in conditions, activities, and impacts of international activities in higher education in various countries). These studies often require time and resources beyond what is customary for the majority of studies. Thus, one cannot be surprised that a strong comparative thrust is found only in a select number of studies, such as some studies on multilateral mobility programmes or on common elements and differences of internationalisation strategies in higher education in various countries.

THE ROLE OF JOURNAL OF STUDIES IN INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

The *Journal of Studies in International Education* (1997 to 2006) has so far published 30 issues. Each issue comprises between four and eight articles, and in recent years book reviews have been included as well, although not regularly. Almost 160 articles have been published by the journal from 212 authors located in 28 different countries from all the world's continents. The highest number of authors (more than 80, 38.0%) come from the United States, followed by Australia (20, 9.0%), the United Kingdom (18, 8.5%), and the Netherlands (17, 8.0%). It is worth noting that many articles have been written by more than one author, frequently by cooperation partners in international higher education activities coming from two different countries.

The articles of the journal reflect the major themes (and many of the subthemes) identified above that obviously form something like an agenda for research and studies about internationalisation in higher education. There is a notable thematic

dominance of articles about institutional strategies and activities in the field of internationalisation and of articles on the internationalisation of the substance of teaching and learning.

The journal is unique insofar as its articles often have a clear *emphasis on persons rather than on institutions or policies*. An educational thrust can be detected in this. To provide a few examples,

- The mobility theme is often focused on the experiences and needs of staff and students while being abroad and after returning back home. Problems of and obstacles for mobility are discussed in a number of articles, as is the question of how intercultural learning and the need to communicate in a foreign language are affecting the individual performance and identity.
- The theme of internationalising the substance of teaching and learning is covered not only through articles on the internationalisation of a broad spectrum of subject specific curricula but also through articles about the quality of the provision; the different cultures with regard to assessment, grading, and recognition; and the use of competences and skills acquired abroad in the home country.
- The theme of knowledge transfer is treated in a variety of articles about the use of ICT and online provisions but also in analyses about the export of study programmes, about the relationship between rich and poor countries, about brain drain and brain gain, and about problems of emigration and immigration.
- A number of articles also deal with the organisation and administration of mobility. These include, for example, analyses of various mobility programmes and national and regional mobility agencies.

The majority of contributions to the *Journal of Studies in International Education* prefer approaches that rely on interviews and on multiple-mode inquiries in case studies. For example, the mobility theme is mostly treated not on the basis of large-scale surveys but rather on the basis of interviews or small survey samples from international students in the institution or the classroom.

Repeatedly, the journal has published articles providing an overview or an analysis of available research on a given topic in the field of internationalisation in higher education. In fact, the editor, de Wit (1997), opened the first issue of the first volume of the journal by analysing the theoretical basis and research methods of studies in international education. Other articles investigated,

- The “pedagogical implications of diverse conceptualizations of internationalisation” in the United States (Schoormann, 1999).
- The reconfiguration of concepts of internationalisation through globalisation (Scott, 2000).
- The various interpretations of globalisation in higher education research (Beerkens, 2003).
- Definitions, approaches, and rationales of internationalisation at the institutional and national levels (Knight, 2004).

Altogether, the *Journal of Studies in International Education* has been a mirror of the diversity of themes, concepts, and findings relevant to understanding international aspects in higher education. It also mirrors changes of emphasis over time. Its publications deserve more careful comparative analyses about the differences in emphasis in various countries and the underlying conditions and rationales.

CONCLUSIONS

Research on the international dimensions of higher education has substantially expanded in recent years. Just as internationalisation in higher education has become clearly more multidimensional and multifaceted, so has research about internationalisation in higher education. The thematic range, the disciplines and research domains contributing to it, and the modes of inquiry have become broader. Altogether, research on internationalisation in higher education has become more strongly intertwined with research on other aspects—a fact that reflects the increasing mainstreaming of international aspects of higher education. Thus, in many respects we note an advancement of the field. In trying to characterize the state of research today, one would not apply the frequently quoted critical remark about research in this domain that Teichler (1996) formulated about a decade ago: “Most of the research available on academic mobility and international education seems to be occasional, coincidental, sporadic and episodic” (p. 341).

In looking at the major thematic areas of research in this domain, we observe in some respects continuity and an overall broadening of the field. A more careful look at the substance of the publications, however, suggests a rapid change of the research discourse linked to the changing debates. To name but a few of these changes,

- Mobility is no longer that of students and staff alone but also of programmes.
- Driving forces are no longer institutions and national policy makers alone but increasingly also supranational organisations.
- New actors have entered the field, notably international consortia and networks.
- The geographical perspectives have been broadened considerably so that internationalisation in higher education has shifted to encompass all regions of the world.

On the whole, research on internationalisation in higher education is characterized by an increasing number of conceptually and methodologically ambitious studies. However, a large segment of studies are so pragmatic and so much driven by practical concerns that we cannot easily identify a well-established field demarcated by a certain degree of quality.

A review of the available literature does not immediately suggest a future research agenda. And in the domain of the internationalisation of higher education, we can expect that changes in higher education continue to be the major drivers of changes in the research agenda. However, we might hope that advancements will be possible

in three respects. First, efforts are needed to improve access to research on the international dimensions of higher education in countries where research findings in this domain are predominantly published in languages other than English. Second, the few genuinely comparative studies on international dimensions of higher education have turned out to be so fruitful that more studies in this direction are obviously desirable. Third, many analyses on the international dimensions of higher education are so much driven by normative assumptions of the authors that they hardly offer any enlightenment to persons not sharing this normative umbrella. More research in this domain that breaks such a circle of narrow normative reasoning is needed.

Last but not least, any effort to summarize the state of research on international dimensions in higher education is likely to reiterate this proposal. There should be a place somewhere in the world where studies in this domain are really collected and documented as comprehensively as possible. Notably, research areas that do not match the dominant categories in a larger framework and research areas in which a substantial number of publications are not published in the most accessible publication outlets need such a place or several of them to promote the understanding of the variety of approaches and findings.

Possibly, our overview of the major thematic areas of research on internationalisation in higher education allows a few further conclusions for future research on this topic. In our view, there are four themes that should be given particular attention.

1. In recent years, the influence of what could be called the “periphery” on international activities in higher education has increased. Supranational organisations and national governmental authorities and agencies, institutional management, and international offices at higher education institutions, the latter having management support and service functions, are trying more than before to shape the international profile of higher education institutions. The question is, however, whether the “periphery” will be successful in influencing the core areas of higher education (i.e., research, teaching, and learning and thus academic staff and students or, as Burton Clark has called it, the “academic heartland”). A similar trend holds true for research about internationalisation of higher education. Researchers in this field must take care that they do not turn too much to the issues of the “periphery” from which they often receive the financial support to carry out their research and evaluations. Instead, they should be analysing what their research activities might actually contribute to the knowledge base in the field of research on higher education.
2. Existing research has shown that internationalisation activities of higher education institutions are less strongly driven by the political and societal *Zeitgeist* than could be expected and public debates might imply. A complete substitution of the paradigm of cooperative internationalisation by the paradigm of competitive globalisation has not occurred, although public debates and a substantial body of research about internationalisation of higher education have been shaped by such a polarisation. Possibly, a new focus can be found in this debate. In our view, debates about the paradigm of

competitive globalisation are focused on neither the attempt to clarify opportunities and problems concerning the payment of tuition fees by international students, nor the strengths and weaknesses of the competitive orientation of public and private higher education institutions, nor the advantages and disadvantages of high stratification or flat hierarchies in national higher education systems. Rather, public debates are centred on the question of whether and how much internationalisation policies and strategies of international organisations, governmental bodies, and institutional management are based on educational and knowledge-related meritocracy or whether such policies and strategies are trying “to sell” particularistic advantages to their respective groups of stakeholders.

3. For a long time, physical mobility was the core activity for the internationalisation of higher education. The value of experiences abroad during studies or in the framework of a research biography has been described and analysed so often that it needs no further affirmative words. But physical mobility also has limits. First, international experiences in the framework of studies, teaching, and research have quantitative limits. If “internationalisation at home” cannot be realised to a higher degree, internationalisation efforts of higher education institutions will lead to a polarisation of winners and losers. Second, despite all organisational and substantial accompanying measures, the support of physical mobility relies on the fact that the immersion into a foreign environment as such triggers important experiential learning. Therefore, study abroad has effects similar to those of an immersion into the world of work through practical placements and internships. However, the genuine strengths of higher education lie in surpassing experiential learning by systematic learning set apart from daily life. For both reasons, it seems to be more important that higher education institutions strengthen international learning in their core activities of teaching, learning, and research and that research on higher education analyses the effectiveness of such core activities more in depth than it has been the case up to now.
4. Through international mobility and other international activities, higher education institutions were able to be quite successful because international learning in everyday life was limited, whereas internationalisation became increasingly important. However, for some time now, we have been observing an increasing internationalisation of everyday life as well. Many students newly entering higher education have already experienced stays abroad or have gained knowledge about other countries through the media and actual encounters with people from other countries in their daily life that the “added value” of study abroad is most likely decreasing. Furthermore, if international dimensions are gradually integrated into study programmes, the special character of study programmes explicitly designed as international ones and of temporary study abroad will be reduced as well. Higher education institutions are faced with the question of whether they regard the decreasing distance between international experiences as something special and as something normal as an acceptable development or whether they develop new emphases to make international mobility and special international study programmes more valuable. For research about international aspects in higher education it is therefore important to analyse this dialectic of normalisation and specialisation of internationalisation.

For policy makers in higher education, research about higher education is a more valuable partner for dialogue if it tries to generate probable future developments of higher education systems and to guide its attention as early as possible to those problems that might soon become manifest in higher education practice. If research about international aspects of higher education picks up on themes such as the four elaborated above, it will very likely be able to offer already important concepts and information when in the near future the public debate about higher education picks up on such themes.

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