

Chapter 4

A Need for New Methodological Communication in Comparative Higher Education Research Projects?

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ABSTRACT

Higher education is a versatile field where researchers from many different professions take part within a common interest. Usually higher education is seen as an interdisciplinary field, but is it rather a disciplinary field where different researchers discuss higher education development within an interdisciplinary context? What makes the field interdisciplinary? This chapter studies if and how interdisciplinarity is established and played out in international comparative higher education projects. A good way to study if and how interdisciplinarity is established in HE projects is to study their methodological approaches because researchers from different backgrounds who are trained in a range of methodological approaches work together to complete a specific project aim. The methodological approach in one single case is studied to look into how interdisciplinarity can develop within a higher education international research project.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) research is an applied field where professionals from different subjects collaborate to enhance the knowledge about higher education systems (Teichler, 2009, Altbach, 2014). There has been considerable transformation within the HE system in general, where at the same time new ways of doing research in international

cross national projects and collaborating among academics has emerged (Musselin, 2007). International higher education cooperation projects are often composed of researchers from a variety of social sciences, some from the humanities and perhaps researchers from other scientific disciplines as well. Within the area of higher education research there has been a trend of doing research within larger international comparative projects,

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which is a fruitful and rewarding change and has been a rather steady development the last 20 years (Teichler, 2014; Kosmützky & Krücken, 2014). In addition, international comparative research is a very good data source, often explorative and could provide unexpected outcomes (Teichler, 1996). Nevertheless, several constraints and methodological problems have become visible as well (Bleiklie, 2014, Reale, 2014). How this influences collaboration between different researchers and research communities is a stimulating question, together with the various implications this has for development within HE.

Within the social sciences there is a tendency to opt for more research collaboration and internationalization of research projects. One implication of this development is the methodological challenges this brings, but at the same time the methodological innovations this can generate. This is also a highly relevant question for higher education research projects. Researchers from different disciplines contribute their perspectives to the field thus creating the interdisciplinarity within. Interdisciplinary research is carried out in a variety of areas conducted at institutes and centres (Klein, 1990, p.47). Weingart (2000, p.26) observed that interdisciplinarity has been “proclaimed, demanded, hailed, and written into funding programs”. Interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, and multidisciplinary are buzzwords as well (Klein, 2010). A higher education project is not an interdisciplinary project just because researchers from different subjects work together. This chapter will study if and how interdisciplinarity is established in international comparative higher education projects. A good way to study if and how interdisciplinarity is established in HE projects is to study their methodological approaches because researchers from different background who are trained in a range of methodological approaches work together to complete a specific project aim. Is there a middle ground or a method developed for a particular project within international higher education collaboration projects? Or would the

different researchers refer back to their specific discipline and the methodological norms within their discipline? The methodological approach within the Transforming Universities in Europe (TRUE) project will be discussed as an example of the tendency within HE collaborative projects to mix methods and how interdisciplinarity was dealt with.

Higher education is a versatile field where researchers from many different professions take part with a common interest in the field. Could the field be regarded as an interdisciplinary field, or is it rather a disciplinary field where different researchers discuss higher education development within an interdisciplinary context? The methodological approach in the TRUE project will be discussed as a single case study where an extended field report will be the starting point to study if and how interdisciplinarity can develop within a higher education international cooperation research project. This question will be followed up in the analysis part. Bleiklie (2014) advocates for some of the advantages with comparative research. Increasing the number of units under study will most likely lead to a better starting point for generalization within comparative research. Working in an international comparative project could give a better understanding of the study topic because the participants have to discuss and negotiate their positions. Bleiklie (2014) underscores that one of the greatest challenges is to know what is being compared, but by using more systematic comparative strategies the HE field would benefit. The notions of discipline and interdisciplinarity in regards to higher education research will further be discussed.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH?

First, it is necessary to define discipline. “The term discipline signifies the tools, methods, procedures, examples, concepts, and theories that account

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