**What is the Nature of the Relationship between Changes in European Higher Education and Social Science Research on Higher Education and (Why) Does It Matter? *Journal of European Integration* 37, (2), 263-279**

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the relationship between changes in European higher education and social science research on this theme and why it matters. HE research is a new field significantly assisted by European funding, the Bologna process and the massification of HE. The field is populated by many emerging researchers but few established academics. The paper examines the sub-field’s characteristics including lack of theoretical/methodological consensus, co-production of the knowledge base and the differing micro and contextual backgrounds of emerging European HE researchers (drawing on a recent study). It considers three recent major European-funded HE research projects as examples of co-production, specifically looking at the kinds of knowledge produced and the strategies adopted to ensure that research outcomes permeate the policy process. It is suggested that the sub-field needs to develop a better infrastructure to support emerging researchers but care needs to be taken not to impair their independence from European bureaucrats.

KEYWORDS

Higher education; policy; co-production; Bologna; emerging researchers; knowledge communities.

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**Introduction**

The paper examines the nature of the relationship between changes in European higher education and social science research on higher education and why this matters. In so doing, it draws on a sociology of knowledge approach as outlined in the editors’ introduction to this volume, particularly drawing on the principles of the symmetry of different knowledge claims, rejection of internal and external divisions between knowledge production and societal or economic developments, localism which emphasizes the micro-settings of scholars and academic departments and contexualism which suggests how national or regional cultures can shape knowledge debates. The paper relates the recent history of a relatively new sub-field of Education studies [[1]](#endnote-1), namely Higher Education (HE) research. This account enquires into the status of HE research (it isn’t a close disciplinary community with high paradigmatic and methodological consensus), its legitimacy (which is as much in relation to practice as policy) and its connections to European education policy and practice. The paper deals with how HE research is generated and how EU bureaucrats may have accidentally helped develop a new type of researcher studying HE, one typically focused on teaching and learning, as well as a new type of HE in the aftermath of the Bologna process reforms to structures, systems and processes in higher education institutions. EU grant funding has played a part in the growth of HE research but it is the Bologna transformation of European higher education and the massification of HE that have generated the most pressing questions for new researchers in the sub-field (Corbett and Henkel 2013; Curaj, Scott et al 2012). Both the social context and the science have often been closely intertwined, in the tradition of co-production of knowledge (Jasanoff 2004), thus to a large extent blurring the internal and external elements of the sub-field. At the same time, the proliferation of research themes and inexperience of many HE researchers mean a high degree of contestation in the field (Bourdieu 1986, 1988) and a danger of overlooking the issue of symmetry in relation to past and present knowledge claims. Also, the prominence of European initiatives fuelling the sub-field’s growth could lead to what Vauchez (2008), writing about the development of European Legal Studies, calls a ‘weak’ academic field, heavily dependent on EU bureaucrats and lawyers for its very existence, though it seems this is only partially true for HE research. As we will see later, the European HE sub-field is characterized by a large number of doctoral students and post-doctoral researchers, typically based in Education, Sociology, Public Administration, Economics or Management/Business units, where HE is often a minority interest for a small number of established academics. Other emerging researchers may be focused on pedagogical research in their own subject, institutional research or working in a unit supporting the development of new academics’ teaching skills. Thus sources of legitimacy for and motivation to work in the field cross many local contexts. In addition, there are a very small number of established HE Research Centres in Europe that attract significant external research funding.

The knowledge produced in the field of HE is very varied. Some of it serves particular political and strategic interests or is funded directly from European sources (whether policy-focused or ‘blue skies’), while other projects deal with practical demands (most usually related to teaching) at the coalface of higher education institutions. Although co-produced by practitioners and researchers, these projects are not directly related to the activities of EU bureaucrats, even though some pedagogic and curricular challenges arise from the consequences of the uneven imposition of the Bologna process in different countries (Curaj, Scott et al 2012). Emerging researchers working in the HE sub-field may have no sense of being located within a coherent academic community (Ashwin et al 2013) and their projects often reflect local conditions or practitioner challenges not European concerns. The lack of agreement on key paradigms or methodologies means that in Bourdieu’s terms (Bourdieu 1986, 1988), this is a highly contested field. It is not, however, just the local or wider national context that gives rise to this, rather it is the wide range of disciplines that HE researchers come from. Emerging HE researchers are not always able to exploit the full potential of the knowledge they have created and may have naïve views about how to interact with the policy process (Ashwin et al 2013). All this is considered in the sections about the field and who undertakes HE research and in the final section of the paper where three large European HE projects are considered. But first we turn to a description and analysis of the field of HE research as presently constituted.

**Higher Education as a Field of Study**

Higher education research is a fast growing area of study in Europe and elsewhere, including North America and Australasia ([McFarlane and Grant 2012](#_ENREF_22); [Tight 2012](#_ENREF_26)). Its content is comprehensive, covering a wide range of matters from academic, student and leader/manager identities, institutions, systems, policies, cultures and discourses to teaching, learning and assessment practices and quality assurance mechanisms. The interest in cultures is particularly apposite as European higher education moves away from transmitting and interpreting national cultures ([Delanty 2001](#_ENREF_16); [Clegg 2012](#_ENREF_9))towards focusing on more global concerns. Not all HE research is social science based, because often HE researchers (especially newer recruits) have no background in social science. This does not matter if they are drawing on their own disciplinary traditions to support their investigations but a minority claim to do social science without knowing the literature or understanding its methods.

The sub-field has been boosted in Europe and beyond as almost all signatory countries to the Bologna agreement are funding and supporting higher education research, whether directly or through publicly- funded institutions. Much of this growth is linked to the massification of higher education, which has led to a search for the systemic, cultural, social, political, economic and organizational requirements of universities that are not elite research-intensive institutions and which may either be dual-intensive (focused on both teaching and research) or teaching-intensive (sometimes with a vocational focus). Undoubtedly the expansion of European higher education has led to the growth of many more teaching-intensive institutions, perhaps because adding research is expensive. Improving teaching has become an important European-wide consideration (European Commission 2013), leading to many institutionally-funded investigations as well as a mass of curriculum development, intervention and networking projects funded by the EU. Governments and higher educational institutions, not just in the European Higher Education Area but worldwide, have become very interested in how students learn, how they should be taught and how they can be assessed, widening socio-economic access to universities, analyzing how higher education and economic development connect, considering how to exercise control over world league tables of universities and how and which quality evaluation measures should be applied to teaching and research. But as with its parent subject Education, which is itself arguably not a discipline but a multi-disciplinary subject ([Deem 1996](#_ENREF_11)), higher education research has a complex and sometimes tenuous relationship to social science. Though it might seem self-evident that the study of higher education, as something so closely bound up with cultural, economic and social development, would have a close connection to social science, both this connection and the theoretical component of higher education research have been questioned ([Tight 2004](#_ENREF_24); [Tight 2014](#_ENREF_25)); Tight based his analysis on outputs published in major international HE research journals. Though most of HE research knowledge has a social science underpinning, those who carry out HE research come from diverse backgrounds, from doctoral students and post-doctoral fellows with a strong social science background embarking on a first career, to those whose first degree might have been in any discipline from physics to history and who have entered the field serendipitously as a second or third career, whether in academe, educational administration or institutional research. Where neither social science nor an alternative disciplinary base is evident, such as history or philosophy, there can also be questions about the quality and validity of the analyses produced.

The foci of higher education research are similarly diverse. One categorisation suggests there is research *into* higher education (e.g policy, organizational studies, academic identities or quality assurance/enhancement); academic development (which supports teaching staff in universities) plus disciplinary pedagogic research ([Clegg 2012](#_ENREF_9)). Leaving aside that there might be both research *on* higher education and research *for* higher education (the latter often comprising institutional research and not necessarily adopting a critical approach), there are also those with no background in educational research but who work in higher education and have become interested in analyzing some of the recent policy developments and organizational consequences through a polemical lens ([Docherty 2011](#_ENREF_17); [Collini 2012](#_ENREF_10)). In Bourdieu’s terms ([Bourdieu 1986](#_ENREF_4); [Bourdieu 1988](#_ENREF_5); [Bourdieu 1993](#_ENREF_6)), higher education research is not just one contested field of cultural and knowledge production but several, with very different routes into them. Overlaying this is the division of academics into those who base their status and prestige on academic power ‘founded on the accumulation of positions allowing control of other positions’ (Bourdieu 1988, 73), such as acting as academic gate keepers, whether as recruiters of other academics or as editors and referees of academic publications and funding bodies and those who base their status and prestige on scientific research expertise and scientific prestige, which is ‘founded on successful investment in the activity of research alone’ (ibid, 74). In higher education research, it is arguable that both capitals are found within the same people but with the proviso that many researchers have little access to either. Yet Bourdieu’s assumption was that those exercising academic power have different habituses and capital to those for whom scientific prestige is their main form of power. So it may be useful before going further to gain an understanding of who it is that actually carries out higher educational research and the extent to which researchers are reliant on EU bureaucrats, either directly or indirectly, for their research questions and funding.

**Who is Conducting Higher Education Research?**

In exploring the recent history of higher education research, one study talks of *forerunners,* mostly from sociology, psychology, philosophy or history who set the boundaries of the field and *pathtakers* who then develop these further. ([McFarlane and Grant 2012](#_ENREF_22)). But given Clegg’s definitional work (2012) and my own view that HE research is really a series of contested sub-fields, things may be a little more complicated. Most of the major established HE researchers in Europe are drawn from the social sciences, mainly from sociology, public administration, economics, psychology, organizational studies, science studies or economics. Their bases include locations like the International Centre for Higher Education Research (INCHER), Kassel, Germany; the Finnish Institute for Educational Research (FIER) at Jyvaskyla in Finland, the Centre for Research on Higher Education Policies (CIPES) at Matosinhos in Portugal, the Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) in Enschede, the Netherlands, the Centre for the Sociology of Organisations (CSO) at SciencesPo, Paris, France and until quite recently the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) [[2]](#endnote-2)at the Open University in the UK . The members of these centres are closely networked with each other, mainly from Western Europe/Scandinavia, run or work in sizeable research centres, tend to dominate cross-national funding as well as major field conferences and are responsible for writing many of the European papers in the main international HE journals and in edited book collections. They are in frequent touch with policy makers, both EU and others, often work closely with them and do consultancy around the world. They work through a variety of means, including through conferences and policy focused events, briefing papers, expert advisory groups, telephone calls, blogs, social media such as Twitter and conventional media interventions. They have strong links to North American and Australasian researchers amongst others. They are mostly members of a European group called the Consortium for Higher Education Researchers (CHER), which organizes an annual conference with a policy focus. But there is also a vast array of researchers working on their own or with a small number of colleagues, from Western, Middle and Eastern Europe, often researching teaching and learning and sometimes involved in European funded projects focused on curriculum development, interventions, networking, teaching and learning, student/staff exchange or conducting national/locally focused studies, sometimes for institutional purposes. A considerable number of such researchers are studying for a doctorate, often part-time or have recently completed one. There are also a few researchers for whom higher education is an arena that they work in only occasionally, with their main interests elsewhere.

Where do the early-career individuals come from? Research conducted with Lynn McAlpine and Paul Ashwin on the biographies, experiences, ambitions and policy interactions of a sample of 42 newcomers to HE research mainly based in Europe and interviewed during spring/summer 2012, throws some light on this. The vast majority (31 women, 11 men) were completing or had recently completed a doctorate in some aspect of HE. There were some sharp divides here between the researchers from mainland Europe who mainly entered higher education research at doctoral level after a bachelors and masters degree in social sciences and those (typically in the UK) who had first and masters degrees in a range of non-social science disciplines, whether STEM or Arts/Humanities and turned to higher education research (which might be a professional doctorate with a substantial taught component and a shorter thesis, usually practitioner or practice-focused or a conventional PhD) as a means to entering a second or third career. Some of the latter group were experienced higher education staff (including academics and student support or quality assurance administrators) or working in professional fields such as healthcare. We found that despite being well-positioned to observe recent HE policy developments, only a minority of our respondents – mainly those who had already been working in HE or a cognate field in a senior post prior to taking their doctorate or those who were in their first career but with experience of European policy networks such as ESIB (European Students Union) or NGOs – were really aware of how they might set out to influence policy decisions. So though co-production through the growth of HE institutions and changes to how they operate via Bologna is stimulating much of the research, the feedback loop is not necessarily operating in the other direction for emerging researchers. The Bologna process may add legitimacy to the knowledge claims of newer researchers but the knowledge they create typically permeates practice rather than policy and only at a very local level.

In Europe, as already noted, there also are a number of well-established centres of HE research. Such centres are typically staffed by a mix of senior and mid to early career researchers, where experienced academics can mentor early career colleagues once the latter’s doctorates are complete. But few of the researchers we interviewed were attached to such centres. This means that there is a new generation of higher education researchers who may not have anyone experienced in the subfields to assist them in their perigrinations around academe and HE policy networks. Nor will most of them end up in academic roles, as the number of new posts is affected by the global and Eurozone financial crises, though some may come to occupy hybrid academic/administrative posts in fields like student support or research management. We found that many of the newer researchers we interviewed had naïve views about policy and believed that when their current project was complete or when they were in a more senior post, then it would be relatively easy to influence policy. On the other hand this does suggest independence from EU bureaucrats or their national equivalent. With a small number of exceptions, only those who had done a doctorate as a route to or alongside an established post in HE or a cognate professional field, were knowledgeable about how policy networks operate and how to permeate these. We have drawn conceptually on work about policy influence in UK schools which examines the different relationships that those working in educational institutions establish with policy, broadly summarised as people being active policy actors or more passive subjects of policy ([Ball et al. 2010](#_ENREF_2); [Ball et al. 2011a](#_ENREF_3); [Ball et al. 2011b](#_ENREF_1)). Well over half of of our sample fell into the latter category, though quite a few had the desire to become ‘future influencers’ of policy. But how, if at all, does HE research permeate the policy sphere? Does the co-production process help this or is being a new researcher in a ‘weak’ and heavily contested sub-field just too challenging for it to work effectively? This is explored in the next section.

**How Does Research on Higher Education Affect Policy on and Practice in European Higher Education?**

There are a number of ways in which HE research can shape policy, from basic research dissemination via email, websites, social media and e-journals, researchers being members of expert panels commissioned by policy-makers, contributions to public or debate on a topic, framing the decisions leading to policy, including the so-called evidence-based policy making ([Clegg 2005](#_ENREF_8); [Walter et al. 2005](#_ENREF_30)), through to changing the decision-making mechanisms of the policy-making processes, reshaping the cultures and practices of organisations and so on. The co-production of knowledge occurring when academics work with practitioners and policy-makers (Jasanoff 2004) is also much in evidence, whether by the established elite in big projects or at a more micro-institutional level by much less experienced researchers. Being in a local or national social context where big changes are happening to higher education as a result of Bologna-initiated changes to structures, credit frameworks, types of degrees, student and staff mobility and quality assurance processes has had a formative effect on European higher education research. There are some very major aspects of European HE that have been particularly shaped by HE research. These include detailed and comprehensive studies of student mobility (e.g Kelo, Teichler et al 2006, Rizva and Teichler 2007), involving student exchange schemes such as Erasmus from 1987 onwards. Student mobility arguably preceded Bologna by many decades or even centuries but has also been a hallmark of both recent European higher education and the Bologna process and a strong driver of shared credit frameworks and common degree cycles and levels. A further key aspect of Bologna has been establishing common quality assurance mechanisms for teaching across the European Higher Education Area and research on quality assurance of teaching and learning has become a major field in itself, with whole journals devoted to it. There have been a number of large EU funded projects on this topic (e.g Eggins 2014) which have both documented and contributed to European HE policy on quality assurance mechanisms and practices. International League Tables and university rankings have been another field where HE research has made a significant impact on what happens in Europe, as in the European Commission sponsored ‘Multi Rank’ project (Van Vught and Ziegele. 2010, 2012) described later in the paper.

But as shaping policy works as much or more through networks ([van Waarden 2006](#_ENREF_29)) as through sifting new evidence and ideas, so in the case of research, it is not just the data themselves (which inevitably in the social sciences are often tentative and provisional ) which provide the impetus to change. In fact, this is rarely the case. Policy makers and politicians don’t tend to look around for new ideas by reading the evidence, they look for evidence that fits what they have already decided to do and often these days that is as likely to be on social media, particularly Twitter, as in policy briefings, at expert panel meetings or through policymaker and practitioner-focused publications. Policymakers may on occasions commission a project (the EC ‘Multi-Rank’ project is one of these) rather than looking at what has been done already. Furthermore, though a lot of ‘policy borrowing’ and ‘policy copying’ certainly exist across different EHEA systems, this is often based on short visits by policy makers and politicians to the system concerned rather than on research.

So if we apply this to higher education, then those with established networks in policy communities, such as members of the well-known European HE research centres, are more likely to be on the inside track in relation to European policy and indeed more likely to be funded to do policy-relevant research than anyone else. Both Bourdieu’s types of capital, academic and scientific converge into policy influence as gatekeepers and researchers combine resources. At local level, some of the many other higher educational researchers, if they have the right kinds of networks (social and academic capital), and can get funding for research (scientific prestige) or work through personal sponsorship (academic capital, which is often gendered), may come into their own. However, this can be serendipitous, as someone’s work coincides with the area policy-makers are tackling and is well-disseminated beyond learned journals or has non-academic involvement built into the research design. This is confirmed by our current work with newer researchers, not just those in the UK, many of whom aspire passively to influence policy but have no idea how to achieve this. They may well have some influence locally but their reach beyond that is likely to be small. So in a field like higher education research, the voice of the few well-established, well-networked researchers prevails on the European stage and *de facto* much funding (both policy focused and ‘blue skies’) will also flow to those researchers. This has the effect of ensuring a certain degree of both conservatism and uniformity, and similar theoretical and methodological underpinnings in what is done and recommended. Whilst not merely serving the bureaucrats, such researchers are much closer to them than the emerging researchers, who are largely exploiting the changes to the HE social context that the Bologna process has made possible. In the broader context of higher education there is also another problem with the potential effects of research on policy and practice. Even at the organizational level, universities themselves are often reluctant to take seriously the work done by higher education researchers (Deem 2006) because their senior teams dislike their organisations being held up as objects for research, despite the importance of academic research in general as a core activity to many institutions. This may, of course, say something about the way in which senior teams in universities operate (Deem 2009, 2012) and the horizons and visions they have for the future ([Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2006](#_ENREF_23); [Huisman, De Boer et al. 2012](#_ENREF_21)). In the next section, the focus shifts to reviewing some of the reforms that have already taken place in European higher education, in this case through the Bologna process, which have fuelled many of the research topics currently being investigated in the HE field, thus vividly demonstrating the effect of the social context on knowledge production.

**Bologna and Changes to European Higher Education**

The project of European coherence in higher education is arguably and largely being pursued at a transnational level through the Bologna process bureaucratically and not always with the benefit of sustained research evidence. But at the national and local level, the many research projects and academic papers on the implementation of Bologna (Wihlborg and Teelken 2014) or on other issues thrown up by the Bologna process (Corbett and Henkel 2013), are more likely to have an effect and one which is independent of the bureaucrats, whilst still engaging with Bologna-related themes. Since the initial Bologna agreement was signed in 1999, many of the larger elements of Bologna, such the three cycles of higher education, student and staff exchange and mobility, ECTS credit transfer and the wide availability of the Diploma Supplement and recognition of systems of quality assurance, have been achieved in principle in the majority of signatory countries, to the extent that there is acceptance of their importance and considerable numbers of countries have reformed their structures and co-operated in quality assurance ([EACEA 2012](#_ENREF_18)). On the other hand, student and staff mobility rates are still quite low (ibid) relative to EU expectations and individual systems of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) vary widely in terms of their governance (for example who appoints or elects rectors and which external stakeholders sit on governing boards or councils), their academic, legal and financial autonomy, their cultures and their support for lifelong learning, as well as how they have implemented the first two cycles of higher education and the flow between these. Of course, there has been much research on the various elements of the Bologna agreement, some by the big players, or by a range of other both financially and academically independent researchers (Wihlborg and Teelken 2014) but it is unclear how much effect this knowledge has had on the overall implementation process, despite its’ evident co-production. This suggests that HE research does not fit neatly into Vauchez’s ‘weak’ field category since it is not solely dependent on European bureaucrats and policy makers for its existence in the way that European legal studies is. The field of HE research is alive and well globally as well as in Europe and in addition, national policies and the day-to-day challenges of HE teachers, researchers and leaders in different national systems are, if anything, a larger stimuli for HE research than European funding or bureaucratic foci and concerns. Many of the topics of HE research in Europe are not dissimilar to those which are pursued by researchers in countries which are not signatories to Bologna, as a glance at the last two year’ submissions to and publications in top journals in the HE field suggests [[3]](#endnote-3). Doing research *for* rather than *on* policy is in any case challenging. Those who run higher education systems tend to want positive recognition of their reforms and changes, not academic criticisms of their failings but they may nevertheless from time to time alight on or commission research which meets their requirement for a scientific backing to decisions already made or about to be made.

Bologna implementation was arguably not helped by the global financial crisis from 2008 onwards or by the related Eurozone crisis, both of which sent several European public higher education systems into crisis mode. As the level of private higher education funding in the EHEA rises, even in those countries which have had relatively little privatization so far, it is questionable how much further progress Bologna will be able to make towards a uniform system of HE. It may be that some of the next areas of development in higher education lie outside the scope of Bologna. Indeed some innovations with a research base seem initially to have passed Europe by; thus whilst the US launched its MOOCS (Massive Open Online Courses) some years ago, Europe was slower to do so (though the UK Open University based FutureLearn has now been set up to do this). MOOCs on higher education topics would be a significant if partial contribution to one of the more elusive elements of Bologna, namely lifelong learning. In the next section, I look at three examples of recent large funded projects on higher education carried out and funded in Europe and the extent to which the social science knowledge generated has contributed through these to the development of European higher education and whether those involved are too closely tied to bureaucratic concerns. These projects are in part themselves an example of Jasanoff’s (2004) co-production of knowledge, in this case alongside policy makers and of Vauchez’s idea of how a weak field might operate, working alongside and closely tied to European bureaucrats, but the three project rationales and genesis differ considerably.

**Three European HE Research Projects**

In this section I look briefly at three European HE projects funded in last few years that are concerned with the challenges and features of current and future European higher education. The first of these is the European Commission funded UMap and Multirank project ([Van Vught and Ziegele 2010](#_ENREF_27)), running from 2005-2010. This project involved a number of the elite group of European educational researchers including CHEPS at the University of Twente and also the Centre for Higher Education in Germany which is more of a think tank than a standard research group but which had already been devising an alternative ranking system for Germany and Austria higher education. Multirank and UMap have always had a practical rather than theoretical focus ([Van Vught and Ziegele 2010](#_ENREF_27)):

‘The U-Map project is the third phase of a research project on developing a European Classification of Higher Education Institutions. The first two phases produced a set of principles for designing the classification as well as a draft of a multi-dimensional classification including an appropriate set of dimensions (the areas in which institutions will be classified) and indicators to measure them. In this phase we evaluate and fine-tune the dimensions and their indicators and bring them into line with other relevant indicator initiatives, all of this in a process of stakeholder consultation and discussion that has been a hallmark of the project since its inception in 2005.’

Ranking and league tables are a big concern for European universities and the European Commission as well as many other HE systems and policy makers ([Hazelkorn 2011](#_ENREF_20)). The two dominant sets of international league tables, the Shanghai Jiao Tong table, which mostly focuses on research and the Times Higher Education ranking, which is broader but uses proxies for teaching quality and has some other problematic features such as stakeholder reputation ranking, do not always feature European universities at the highest level, particularly the Jiao Tong listings (whose development was funded by the Chinese government). So whilst the EC want to develop a set of classifications using a more complex set of factors, making allowances for significant institutional variation is evident. Although social science expertise about universities as organisations and how to classify them internationally has fed into the projects, Multirank itself seems to have arisen far more from the demands of European politicians and policy makers than from social science itself, as most of the literature critiques league tables rather than seeking to emulate them, though it is true that the Multirank project does that to an extent too. The co-production of knowledge in this project could be seen as somewhat lop-sided. The EC adopted Multirank as of December 2012 (see <http://www.u-multirank.eu>) and so presumably hopes that it will in time take its place alongside the Times Higher and Jiao Tong league tables of universities. But of itself, this exercise does not contribute to the improvement and development of European higher education. Indeed it may serve to exacerbate the differences between the elite universities and other institutions of higher education. However, maybe it is better to get social scientists to develop something rather than leave it to the private sector? The Times Higher League Table has strong links with Thomson publishers who run the Science and Social Science Citation Indexes and own many of the journals in those indices and Jiao Tong relies a lot on citation data. The Multi-Rank project has also led to more conventional outputs such as books ([Van Vught and Ziegele 2012](#_ENREF_28)). But does this trend to commissioned research and co-production of knowledge suggest that the use of social science knowledge and expertise in policy comes at a price to academic freedom? This would be an example of HE research as a weak field (Vauchez 2008).

The second project considered here was a scoping exercise funded by the European Science Foundation ‘Higher Education in Europe Beyond 2010: Resolving Conflicting Social and Economic Expectations (2005-2007)’ and was part of the ESF’s ‘Forward Look’ programme. A main aim was to develop an academic agenda for future higher education research. The same elite group of researchers were involved in the project as in other major European studies of higher education. It was led by John Brennan of the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information in the UK (the Centre, based at the OU, has now closed) with Jurgen Enders from CHEPS, University of Twente, the Netherlands, Christine Musselin from SciencesPo in France, Ulrich Teichler from INCHER at the University of Kassel, Germany, and Jussi Valimaa of FIER at the University of Jyvaskyla in Finland from 2006-2007. As well as reviews of existing research, the project also held workshops with other researchers in the field and focused on a number of themes including: higher education and the needs of the knowledge society; higher education and the achievement or absence of equity and social justice; higher education and its communities; the steering and governance of higher education and finally the differentiation and diversity of institutional forms and professional roles ([Brennan, Enders et al. 2009](#_ENREF_7)). After this ESF developed a new programme of research, the EUROCORES. The latter also involved national research councils but it was not surprising that several of the projects in the subsequent EuroHESC programme went to those who had done or were linked to those who had undertaken the initial scoping exercise. This project and the programme that followed were undoubtedly fused with elements of blues skies social science research but apart from a small number of early career higher education researchers who worked on some of the projects as research assistants, it did not build any significant new social science capacity but relied on existing networks and researchers. If we are to work towards an stronger higher education system in Europe, we need to also think about building serious capacity in higher education research alongside this elite group. In scattered fields of researchers, those with the most academic and scientific capital tend to dominate. Only a few of the Centres in the core group of European social scientists actually also teach higher education topics at undergraduate or masters level, so the research does not always even permeate teaching.

The final project is one on university autonomy which was in two parts, the first starting in 2009 and the second in 2010 and which was also ostensibly a very applied project more akin to Multirank than to ‘Higher Education in Europe beyond 2010’ and another example of co-production. The funding came from the European Universities Association (a Europe-wide university mission group) and the European Commission’s Lifelong Learning Programme but a number of individual universities also assisted the study. The project initially explored the complexities of university autonomy, which is often treated in the literature as though it were a single and easily identifiable phenomenon, and then moving onto classify European universities by country on the basis of a fourfold typology of dimensions of autonomy: organisational, financial, staffing and academic autonomy, in 26 European countries. Each dimension is divided into different indicators. A scorecard for each dimension gives a percentage score to each national system and adding them together, classifies them into four groups with different levels of autonomy. Unlike Multirank, this project is not aimed at developing a new league table but is intended to inform higher education policy in each country and to create a debate about university autonomy at system and European level ([Estermannet al. 2011](#_ENREF_19)). At least one of the researchers who worked on the project was a relative newcomer to higher education research and Estermann was a professional administrator. Unlike Multirank, the conceptual framework from this study can be applied to other empirical work, including individual universities, so its existence has not only contributed to a Europe wide debate about university autonomy but also to the furtherance of an area of higher education research in its own right. However, interestingly it too is an example of co-production of knowledge alongside policy makers and other potential users of that knowledge. All three projects show how difficult it is to separate the internal from the external architects of social science research but equally demonstrates how this co-production may produce knowledge which is less critical than it might be if it operated entirely outside the EU context.

**Why Does All This Matter?**

The paper has explored, in an attempt to map the development of a new sub-field which has operated within the social context of the Bologna reforms, the content, conditions and growth of European higher education research knowledge and issues of symmetry around different knowledge claims, who undertakes this research and their backgrounds (localism), the national systems they work within (contextualization) the extent of co-production of knowledge, the merging of internal and external divisions in knowledge creation and how established academics and bureaucrats can often be intertwined, how higher education research seeks to have an effect on policy-making (such as in the fields of student mobility, quality assurance of teaching and learning and league tables/rankings) and the naïvete of some of the more junior proponents of HE research in this regard. The paper has also summarized some of the major changes taking place in European higher education as a consequence of the Bologna agreement (not all of them on the basis of research evidence) and three recent funded projects on higher education themes which were very much related to wider European policy themes, albeit in different ways. As noted at the beginning of the paper, European higher education research covers many themes but also has a tenuous relationship with social science, since emerging researchers may have little or no grounding in this but rather come with more practical concerns from a wide range of disciplines. This adds to the lack of paradigmatic and methodological agreement in the field. Furthermore, though higher education research is burgeoning, much of the growth is in relatively new researchers who lack the experience, networks and other aspects of academic and scientific capital that more senior higher education researchers have but do have the advantage that they are not advancing the requirements of bureaucrats and are often genuinely independent researchers. The pyramid of researchers is far from top-heavy numerically but in practice most of the researchers who conduct significant social science research in the sub-field are a tightly-knit network who come from a small number of research centres in Western European countries and who are well-networked into policy communities too. This has consequences for the kind of research that is done, its theoretical underpinnings and methodologies and its future sustainability, particularly where it is not linked to undergraduate or masters teaching. It also has consequences for the future development of European higher education. The skillful use of social science in relation to researching and shaping higher education policy making and policy reform in Europe does matter because otherwise the policy makers will have everything their own way but perhaps the diversity in its focus, methodologies and theoretical perspectives at lower levels, though in some ways a weakness, means the knowledge produced is more detached from bureaucratic concerns and perhaps more critical than it can be at the level of more established researchers.

As we have seen in the paper, the implementation of the Bologna process is still far from complete and there are many new challenges ahead, particularly in respect of the current financial crisis in the Eurozone, which is likely to bring more private higher education and less government influence over what happens to HE systems and institutions. The ‘public’ systems of higher education in the European Higher Education Area still have very many differences, yet the amount of genuinely comparative research on European higher education is quite small. This is despite many previous EU funded collaborative projects in various versions of the Framework programmes, Socrates, Tempus, etc. All too often the results of such funding have receded into the background, leaving little or no mark on either social science or higher education, except nationally or more locally. In addition, there are too few mechanisms for putting together the accumulated knowledge of many individual projects other than systematic literature reviews, which are quickly outdated and may be of limited interest to policy makers. There is little flow into the established centres of higher education research from the wider reservoirs of newer higher education researchers and in fact more of the current centres may themselves disappear as funding becomes harder to obtain. So whilst it has been argued that HE research in Europe is only in part a ‘weak’ field dependent on EU bureaucracy for its survival since newer researchers are more independent, its health is not secured because research capacity at the bottom of the ladder is not necessarily being retained and the knowledge produced is not often feeding into policy, partially because of the lack of awareness of how to do this.

It is undoubtedly important that social science continues to inform the development of European higher education systems and their institutions but it is also important that such inputs are critical and do not just serve the interests of bureaucrats. Using a sociology of knowledge approach to this theme has allowed the skewed pyramid of European HE research to become more visible and has shown the complexities of the micro and social contexts in which such knowledge is co-produced and the variation in whether HE research is tied to bureaucratic concerns or to the day-to-day challenges of practitioners. The use of the sociology of knowledge approach, which is different to that used in most other accounts of the growth of HE research, has also suggested that distinguishing between internal and external drivers of research is unhelpful and that all knowledge claims need to be acknowledged.

In conclusion, both academic and scientific capital in the subfields of European higher education research remain locked into a small number of locations and those who are part of the research elite are not necessarily opening up policy networks to newcomers, yet these networks and co-production of knowledge would benefit considerably from permeation by a plurality of different kinds of higher education research. Equally, the freedom of emerging HE researchers to investigate any topic they wish is worth preserving since this helps to guarantee that HE research does not completely conform to Vauchez’s (2008) idea of a weak field, upheld by bureaucrats not academics. The story of European HE research has until now largely remained untold within the field of European studies, yet as this paper has demonstrated, what happens to the co-production of higher education research knowledge is very important to Europe’s future.

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**Notes**

1. This ambiguity between whether Higher Education research is a sub-field or a sub-discipline relates to a wider debate about the status of Education as a discipline or subject. It may be best characterized as a subject because its proponents come from a wide range of disciplines and there is no paradigmatic agreement between different academics within the field. This is reflected in Higher Education research too. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. CHERI closed in summer 2011 and its staff have now dispersed [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Confidential communication to the author [↑](#endnote-ref-3)