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## **The role of national policies in ensuring that higher education produces knowledgeable professionals: A comparative study**

### **Abstract**

In this paper we examine policy texts in three European societies to consider the ways in which they construct a view of how each society ensures the production of knowledgeable professionals. Based on an analysis of national policy texts in England, Germany and the Netherlands, we argue that there are differences in the ways in which higher education is positioned as being responsible for producing knowledgeable professionals; the ways in which employment is defined, and the roles that research is expected to play in the production of professionals. These differences are related to the national structure of the higher educational system and more fundamental notions of the role of higher education in society. We argue that these differences offer helpful alternative ways of thinking about the relations between higher education and employment.

### **Extended Abstract**

Comparability between educational systems is one of the core ideas for the common European Higher Education Area. In the Bologna Process legislative and structural adjustments have been made to ensure this goal. However, underlying disparities in the ideas of what purpose higher education should be aimed at can jeopardize the creation of a common understanding.

By deciding on policy content, national and European governments create the architecture of the higher education system in which universities operate (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016; Shay, 2013). One can say that by doing so, governments provide universities their *space* to manoeuvre: Policies do not tell you what to do, they create circumstances in which a range of options are available (Ball, Maquire & Braun, 2013). With that, governments provide certain options, while deliberately leaving out other. This implies that policy interventions are more than a rhetoric figure, but rather interventions in textual form reaching out to shape educational practice (Karseth & Solbrekke, 2016; Ball, 1993).

Furthermore, this also means that governments need others for the realisation of their policy intentions (Alford & O'Flynn, 2012; Osborne, 2010), and others need to act within the space provided. However these actions are often volatile and not well documented, which leaves policy documents as the main source for policy intentions to survive over time (Ashwin & Smith 2016)

In this paper we examine policy texts in three European societies to consider the ways in which they construct a view of how each society ensures the production of professionals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Method**

In a comparative content analysis of relevant policy documents on the national level we considered how the German, Dutch, and English national policies translate their collective European policy environment into their own strategies. Working beyond the system-differences, the collective rationale for selection was to include policy documents on the provision of knowledgeable professionals and on the connection of research and teaching in higher education, which can be considered to have nationwide impact, written by the national (or federal) government, or national relevant funding or advisory bodies. The differences between the three national systems resonate with the different choices for policy documents of each country included.

In the Dutch higher education system since the 1990s, every five years, the Dutch national government produces a visionary document on the directions for higher education. The last three of these documents (OC&W, 2007, 2011, 2015) were included in this study.

In the German higher education system the Council of Science and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat, WR*) is the institution as close as possible to a governmental agency in the German HE system. Included were Recommendations of the German Council of Science and Humanities on the relation between higher education and the labour market (WR, 2015; WR, 2014); additionally, older documents were included to clarify strands of the discussion that led to the current developments (WR, 2007; WR, 2006).

The English perspective is based on the recent Green (BIS 2015) and White (BIS 2016) papers on Higher Education in England, as well as the technical documents that support these, as well as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Quality Code (QAA 2016). The reason for focusing so strongly on recent documents is that the Green and White Paper represent a fundamental shift in the relation between research and teaching. The QAA Quality Code (QAA 2016) is analysed because this still forms the baseline requirement for the Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF) that has recently been introduced in England.

### *Analysis*

In the analysis we were interested in national governments' (strategies) visions, rationales and practices of why and how to educate knowledgeable professionals including the connection of research and teaching in universities. The three national settings have both similarities and differences in their respective higher education system architecture. Based on a thorough discussion among the three authors on this architecture and the existence and relevance of policy documents, for every national setting a selection of documents was chosen. These documents were written in Dutch, resp. German, resp. English. The documents were read in full by the author of that country.

During our analysis it showed that the policy space provided by national governments are defined on different levels, although their prominence differs between national settings. The levels we have found are here used to present our comparative findings on: a) the position the government defines for higher education in the wider society, b) the aims the government policy provides for higher education graduates (what to educate for), c) the space provided on what to educate about, and d) lastly the space

that is provided on how to educate. Additionally the analysis was focussed on the position of research in each of these levels.

### **Findings**

Summarized the findings show how each of the countries has a different strategy to ensure this provision, which is intertwined with both the architecture of the higher education system, as well with the more fundamental position the nation addresses to higher education in society. The policy-related position of higher education ranges from being the provider of academics that by definition will be good professionals (German), to the provider of good professionals but only if higher education aligns with what the market agrees on (English). The findings also show a difference in the details that policy documents describe on what to educate for, what to educate and how to educate ranging from rather detailed on all levels, including what role research should play in teaching (Dutch), towards having no description at all, explicitly since the market should decide (English) or implicitly since it is presumed universities know themselves best what education to provide (German). In our presentation more detailed differences on the three country perspectives will be given and discussed.

### **Discussion**

Based on these findings we argue that there are clear differences in the ways in which higher education is positioned as being responsible for producing employable graduates; the ways in which employment is defined, and the roles that research is expected to play in the production of graduates. We argue that these differences offer helpful alternative ways of thinking about the relations between higher education and employment, that open up greater space for debate around the role of higher education in producing professionals for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

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