

Higher education systems and the challenge of the entry of new providers

This panel discussion provides an international comparative analysis of the changing institutional structure of higher education in: England, Germany, Australia, Canada, and the USA brought about by the development of higher level vocational education in these five countries. The presenters consider how current developments address two key policy concerns: an emphasis on high skills as a means of achieving economic competitiveness and raising productivity; and the promise of increasing access for students hitherto excluded from higher education. We address these questions in relation to specific country contexts, in order to highlight similarities and differences in developments within the European arena and in a wider global context. We locate our analyses in an understanding of the different political and socio-economic conditions within different countries, which render particular reforms and innovations both possible and realizable in one context, but almost unthinkable in another. We argue for the need to recognize and embrace diversity in provision, while using comparison across countries as a means of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions of how things are and what is possible within individual country contexts. Such comparative analysis is prerequisite for answering questions of policy transfer and learning from others.

New, distinctive forms of higher vocational education are growing rapidly across a range of countries, as demonstrated in the 2014 OECD Review *Skills Beyond School*. They respond to two key policy concerns: an emphasis on high skills as a means to achieve economic competitiveness and raise productivity, and the promise of open access for students hitherto excluded from higher education. In specific country contexts, both within the European arena and in a wider global context, there are both similarities and differences in developments, for different political and socio-economic conditions within countries render particular reforms and innovations both possible and realizable in one context, but almost unthinkable in another. Undertaking an international comparative analysis of current reforms provides the opportunity for policy learning through a critical understanding of differently evolving provision of higher vocational education, that refuses assumptions that policy borrowing from apparently successful countries offers a straightforward model for others to adopt. In the contributions to this panel discussion, we emphasise the impossibility of imposing uniformity across European countries, and argue that there is a need to recognize and embrace diversity, while using comparison across countries as a means of challenging taken-for-granted assumptions of how things are and what is possible within individual country contexts.

The panel discussion brings together the work of researchers who have undertaken research in England and Australia and collaborated with colleagues researching in Germany and Canada. This work is brought together through a focus on the following key questions:

- What (if anything) is distinctive about evolving forms of higher vocational education?
- How are these forms of provision positioned in relation to existing university HE?
- How do questions of distinction and status play out in different country contexts?
- Whose interests are served by higher vocational education?
- What are the implications for equity and inequality in new and evolving forms of provision?
- What can be learned in the European arena from this international comparison of higher vocational education?

The panel discussion will be framed by a presentation from Bathmaker, Webb and Orr drawing on their own work and collaborations with Wheelahan, Graf and Powell. They will discuss the policy rationales for the expansion of higher vocational education in colleges in Anglophone settings since around the turn of the 21st century. This presentation will explore the question of the limited growth of applied degrees in colleges in liberal market economies. Some comparisons will be drawn with work-based higher education in Germany that brings together a nexus employers' interests and university standards in dual-study programmes. Theoretical frames for understanding the continued hierarchical nature of HE systems that keep college based higher education 'in their place' will be suggested. The second presentation from Bathmaker takes up the question of the elusive pursuit of excellence and inclusion in an unequal playing field through an analysis of discourses of distinction and equity in English higher vocational education. The third presentation from Webb, Knight, Hodge and Rawolle develops this exploration of the question what (if anything) is distinctive about forms of higher vocational education in Australia. Comparisons between university and college-based bachelor degrees are drawn through analyses of student participation data and the marketing discourses for these degrees. The fourth presentation from Orr brings together analysis of new forms of higher vocational education in Australia with an analysis of the UK skills plan to ask what is evolving here. Together the four presentations will address the conference theme about the changing shape of higher education by enabling discussion to consider how these changes are evolving in different contexts. In comparing these developments and contexts the discussion will bear in mind the conference questions: Are these changes inevitable? Are they happening everywhere and in the same way? Is higher education becoming increasingly a means of social reproduction? Is there space for diversity and inclusion in an increasingly stratified system? To what extent can institutions develop and maintain a distinctive mission? How can higher education research contribute to understanding and managing stratification?