

## **Key insights into the world class, national champions and local heroes of 21st century higher education: Towards a better understanding of emerging competitive horizons (0215)**

Hoffman David<sup>1</sup>, Jussi Välimaa<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland*

### **Background, context and general purpose**

The heuristic device of competitive horizon draws attention to critical resources and processes that basic units and scholars orientate to, over time (1-4). An empirical look at these orientations reveals a specific relationship to the state-of-the-art in disciplines, fields of study and specialties. The competitive horizon illuminates tension between *transforming* the state-of-the-art and *reproducing* it. The salient feature of the university is that both processes are simultaneous and ongoing at the heart of the knowledge production (5-9).

The recent studies carried out by the authors have led them to conclude this heuristic can be used to move beyond the state-of-the-art, concerning key similarities and differences within and between established higher education systems (8,10,11).

### **Specific goals**

This paper firstly grounds the heuristic in terms of the empirical studies which have led the authors to the assertions discussed in this paper (1-4).

Secondly, two major challenges are presented, as the heuristic is now incorporated to an international comparative mixed-methods study with a wider geographical scope (1-4, 12). A second challenge concerns the initial studies focus on basic units and individuals (13,14), where the present threshold in scope now involves a new level of analysis: The HEI.

Thirdly, the way in which the heuristic is being used in the most critical stages of the mixed-methods design, involving six higher education research teams in six different countries, across three continents. Specifically, the heuristic – in conjunction with theory of the middle range (15), linked to transformation and reproduction (5,9), disciplinary cultures (14,16), massification (17) and academic capitalism (18, 19), will be used to cross the threshold between descriptive-level profiles, to interpretive-level qualitative multiple case studies. This threshold is key because subsequent explanatory-level quantitative studies hinge on robust analytical generalization – to theory – which will allow meaningful statistical generalizations – to populations.

The theory of the middle range (above) will be used to on a global set of questions regarding the most important ways in which HEIs are networked within and between the three most powerful economic regions on the globe (in the year this study began, 2009): The USA, Japan and Europe. Knowledge production and the nature of networks accounts for their present economic standing (20, 21). However, discourses linked to knowledge societies, economies, network societies, learning societies and other related notions often are used by a variety of actors as if interchangeable, which is not the case (7). The present study has been designed to illuminate the way in which HEIs, the people working in them and linked networks may actually comprise distinct variants of 'knowledge societies', whether similarities might be more important

or if in fact past discourses have clouded more important ways to think about these issues (12).

### **Analytically-based purposeful selection of the 'world class', 'national champions' and 'local heroes' of global higher education**

In the present stage of the study in focus, the heuristic of competitive horizons has proved useful in breaking free of the normative discussions that characterize the initial stages of international comparative studies (22,23).

Three key insights that the heuristic of competitive horizons underlines are firstly, that the three archetypal basic units and individual scholars are in high demand and that none is 'better' than another in economic terms (24). This finding flies in the face of normative policy agenda setting associated with the OECD, UNESCO, WTO and warned against by the cutting edge scholars (25,26).

Secondly, the heuristic is useful in explaining the reality of interconnected co-existence of *world class* units and scholars, in close proximity to *national champions* and *local heroes*, who orientate to a quite different set of demands, resources and associated rewards (24). The implication here is that by focusing on only one type of capital (5), suboptimal approaches to management, based on 'non-evidenced-based' agenda setting that prescribes without informed understanding, exacerbates organizational complexity unnecessarily (1-4).

Thirdly, the heuristic analytically illuminates issues often missed, as HEIs focus on 'world-class' discourse. Specifically, disciplinary areas, interdisciplinary fields of study or practices in which local heroes or national champions have become so far removed from the global state-of-the-art, they are unable to comprehend that lack of capacity is creating problems for stakeholders in need of knowledge to understand society's important challenges. The heuristic of competitive horizons shines an unflattering, yet analytically comprehensive, spotlight on problem areas with regard to societal needs and expectations (1-4).

### **Higher education's competitive horizons and shifting geopolitical centres of gravity**

Comparative competitive horizons of 21<sup>st</sup> higher education allow us to interrogate the relationship between the nation state to emerging regions, like the EU, NAFTA, ASEAN and effects (if any) on selective (or indiscriminate) policy uptake concerning the activities of HEIs, continuities and changes, along with the very real possibility that the academic heartland no longer coincides with knowledge production in some important settings, but not others, where little may have changed in recent decades.

Of greater significance is the heuristic's potential use in follow-on studies. The starting point (USA, Japan and the EU) will allow subsequent comparison with new global centres of gravity. Perhaps more important might be settings that have never benefitted from the economic growth linked to knowledge production, whether specific groups of people, locations or settings – in otherwise wealthy societies, regions – in supranational or domestic terms or entire continents (27, 28).

In this paper, we trace the development of an empirically-rooted heuristic, which has been key to formulating explanations more convincing than rival

explanations, especially those in national-level and regional (EU) policy discourse. In taking the heuristic forward, we face clear challenges; yet, the potential of the heuristic appears promising in international comparative higher education studies. While clearly a conceptual discussion of the middle range, as opposed to grand theory (15,29), it is our hope that presenting this paper, the resulting dialogue with colleagues and critique will assist us in further articulating our efforts and connecting with others interested in similar topics.

**References 1-29 excluded for review purposes**