

**International Perspectives on Higher Education Research**  
Volume 9

# Theory and Method in Higher Education Research

**Jeroen Huisman**  
**Malcolm Tight**  
Editors



**International Perspectives on Higher Education Research**  
Volume 9

Theory and Method in Higher Education Research

*Theory and Method in Higher Education Research* contains contemporary contributions to international debates regarding the application and development of theory and methodology in researching higher education.

Higher education research is a developing field internationally, which is attracting more and more researchers from a great variety of disciplinary backgrounds within and beyond higher education institutions. As such, it is an arena within which a wide range of theories, methods and methodologies is being applied. As an expanding multidisciplinary area of interest, we may also expect increased development of theory and method.

This volume aims to offer a channel for discussion, critique and innovation. It should become essential reading for the growing numbers of researchers engaging with higher education across the globe.



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# THEORY AND METHOD IN HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

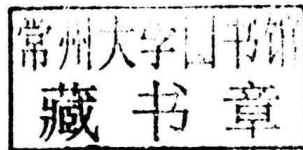
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THEORY AND METHOD IN  
HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

# INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH

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# EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

## THE CONTEXT

The higher education research community is steadily increasing in size and influence. Much of the interest in higher education research remains, however, at the level of critique of trends in policy or evaluation of the effectiveness of changes in practice. On the basis of an analysis of the implicit or explicit use of theory in contributions to 17 higher education journals in 2000, one of us concluded that higher education researchers constituted an a-theoretical community of practice (Tight, 2004). A more recent analysis (Tight, 2012) seems to suggest that, over time, there is more theoretical engagement present in journal articles. The other editor (Huisman, 2009) has argued that much could be gained if higher education researchers would make much more use of theoretical insights and frameworks from the social science disciplines.

Regarding the use of methods, the picture is slightly different. The majority of books and journals in higher education make explicit use of methods and/or methodologies (Tight, 2012). Our observation is, however, that there is rather limited critical engagement with methods and methodology. That is, methods are usually explained, but very often rather briefly, and there is hardly any attention paid to the advantages and downsides of the methods used. The word length of journal articles does put a limit on what can be discussed, but we would argue that methods are too often presented in a taken-for-granted vein. We stress, however, that higher education research is very diverse (Bray & Major, 2011; Goodyear et al., 2009), and that the use of theory and method may differ significantly across research topics and outlets (journals vs. books), and, more specifically, in terms of the geographical location of the journal.

This volume – the first in what is intended to be a series – will, therefore, make a substantive contribution to the development of the higher education research community by helping to focus more attention on issues of theory and method. The focus of the contributions is on the critical discussion of aspects of the theory and/or method being applied or developed.

## THEORY AND METHOD

We have taken a rather pragmatic stance regarding what constitutes a theory or a method. Our point of departure was that theory may refer to specific mid-range theories developed within higher education – for example academic literacies, communities of practice, diversity, modes of knowledge, threshold concepts – as well as to broader discipline-based (psychology, management, history, linguistics, public administration, political sciences, sociology, economics) perspectives. The methods considered would include the broad range developed within educational and social research – for example multivariate analyses, documentary analyses, interviews, observation, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, secondary data analyses – as well as methodologies specifically developed within higher education research (e.g. phenomenography).

We think this broad conceptualization, warranted by the rich diversity of approaches in the field of higher education, has led to many interesting proposals and has allowed contributors more scope to present what they thought was relevant and important. That some have argued that it was sometimes hard to distinguish theory from method (as the contributions on critical discourse analysis attest) strengthened us in the belief that any restrictive definitions of theory or method would have been detrimental to the purposes of the volume.

With these caveats regarding the problem of making clear distinctions, this volume contains four contributions on theory (queer theory, variation theory, feminist theory and theories of academic identity). The other 10 contributions are primarily on methods, though we would stress again that the three discourse analysis chapters contain theoretical elements as well.

## QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE METHODS

It is striking to see that most of the contributions to this volume focus on qualitative methods, with only one focusing explicitly on quantitative methods (structural equation modelling) and two paying attention to both qualitative and quantitative methods (mixed methods, comparative research). There are two explanations for this. Our call for contributions has particularly attracted researchers from Europe and Australia, and these regions may be more qualitatively oriented than, for example the United States. Tight (2012) reports that across the 15 journals he analysed, the division between qualitative and quantitative approaches was more or less

equal, but that four of the US-based journals examined were dominated by quantitative methods. The other explanation may be that qualitative methods lend themselves more easily to critical reflection than quantitative methods. This is not to say, of course, that there are no interesting developments in quantitative methodology (see, e.g. discussions on structural equation modelling, fuzzy set logic and comparative designs).

## FUTURE PLANS

A second volume on this theme is already being prepared for publication, and it is our aim to produce further volumes after that. If, therefore, you have an interesting proposal for a contribution on some aspect of theory and method in higher education research, we would like to hear from you.

Jeroen Huisman  
Malcolm Tight  
*Editors*

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# COMPARATIVE RESEARCH IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDIES: CONSIDERING THE DIFFERENT LEVELS OF COMPARISON AND EMERGING METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Lorenza Antonucci

## ABSTRACT

*This chapter discusses the main challenges in higher education comparative research, focusing on cross-national forms of comparison and presenting examples from European research. The first part stresses the importance of constructing concepts which can travel across countries. This part identifies the different vertical levels of comparison involved in higher education cross-national research, discussing how the need for exploring general patterns in higher education (e.g. globalisation and Europeanisation) is confronted with the importance of taking into account the diversity within the particular cases (e.g. institutional and individual experiences). The second part focuses on the equivalence of*



*meaning in large-N (in particular, the Eurostudent and REFLEX datasets) and small-N studies, identifying the respective limits of the two forms of comparison. The chapter contends that comparative research in higher education could benefit from more collaboration between small-N qualitative comparativists and experts of large-N studies used in European policy-making.*

## INTRODUCTION

The field of comparative higher education research has grown dramatically in the last few years. The increasing interest in comparing can be ascribed to the need to identify ‘the extent to which social phenomena are shaped by universal system factors and the extent to which they are shaped by unique factors intrinsic to the specific time, place and culture in which they occur’ (De Vaus, 2008, p. 251). By engaging in both small-N and large-N comparisons, comparativists in higher education aim to understand how supranational processes (Europeanisation, globalisation, internationalisation) trigger changes in the existing systems of higher education.

Despite its increasing popularity, a number of authors have remarked on the lack of methodological awareness characterising comparative studies in higher education. Comparative researches are still in their ‘descriptive phase’, meaning that the comparative element is mostly used as a secondary aspect, and it is not integrated in the theoretical framework (Goedegebuure & Van Vught, 1996). Furthermore, comparative studies have mainly been used for exploratory purposes, and they have rarely been ‘grounded on a specific theoretical basis’ (Teichler, 1996, p. 462). Considering the main challenges of comparative research, this chapter will focus on two main issues. The first issue concerns the clarification of the different levels to consider in the comparison. Many vertical levels of comparison are involved in higher education cross-national research. An explicit framework that clarifies the interplay between the different levels would avoid dealing with abstract concepts which are not empirically grounded, and would allow concepts to better travel across countries. The second issue concerns the equivalence of meaning. The question of how this can be improved in large-N and small-N comparative research in higher education will be discussed in the context of recent studies (including Eurostudent, research on the social dimension of European higher education and REFLEX, ‘The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society: New Demands on Higher Education in Europe’).