

Who ensures that Society has the professionals it needs? Differences in the policy directions of three European countries

Authors

Didi M.E. Griffioen¹, Paul Ashwin², Antonia Scholkmann³

[1] Professor and Head of Department

Department of Higher Education, Research & Innovation

Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences

D.M.E.Griffioen@hva.nl

[2] Professor of Higher Education and Head of Department

Department of Educational Research

Lancaster University

Paul.Ashwin@Lancaster.ac.uk

[3] Associate Professor in Organisational Development and Learning Organisations

Faculty of Social Sciences

Aalborg University

ansc@hum.aau.dk

Abstract (165)

In this article, we examine how policy documents from three European countries – the Netherlands, Germany and England – position a key outcome of higher education: the development of high level professionals. Our findings show significant differences between the policies in the three countries in terms of in the definitions of high level professionals, the characterization of the the education needed to produce high level professionals, and the mechanisms identified as ensuring the production of high level professionals. Our findings show that in order to develop a comparative understanding of higher education outcomes across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) it is necessary to examine the strategic and visionary perspective of national policies in different EHEA countries. This is significant given that the EHEA's claim to ensure common outcomes across its higher education systems.

Keywords: Higher Education, policy, steering mechanisms, comparative analysis

Word count: 8028

Introduction

Higher education has always had a central role in the education of citizens. This has traditionally been linked to the development of the professional fields of medicine, law and theology (Grace 2014).

More recently higher education has been positioned as crucial in the production of employable citizens in societies worldwide (Griffioen 2019; Ibarra-Colado 2001; Jackson 2014; Marginson 2014).

This was formalized in the 2015 European Yerevan Communiqué (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education 2015): “By 2020 we are determined to achieve an European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (...) where educational opportunities provide the competences and skills required for European citizenship, innovation and employment”.

The development of skilled professionals is one of the greatest challenges facing governments, and higher education has emerged as a central tool to address this challenge (Durazzi 2018). In Europe, this has involved all European nations ratifying the Lisbon Agreement as a steering mechanism to ensure comparability in curricular formats, institutional structures, quality assurance, continuous evaluation, responsiveness and accountability (Capano & Piattoni 2011). Although collective steering mechanisms at the European level imply that “different locations and countries are converging towards a common type of organisational structure” (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007, 478), national policies play a mediating role by creating “powerful political, legal and financial operating conditions” (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007, 485). Whilst state policies are important, we acknowledge that they are only a part of the picture of an increasingly deregulated higher education landscape where, for example, university-company collaborations increasingly have their own regulative power (e. g. Durazzi & Benassi 2020; Graf 2017).

Despite the limitations of their influence, policy statements are important for the architecture of the higher education system (Capano & Pritoni in press). Authors such as Czarniawska & Joerges (1996) have pointed out, ideas will ‘travel’ across time and space and find their local interpretations which can diverge widely from the original idea. This phenomenon of idea-translation has been studied for educational ideas and policies as well, although mostly with a focus on how national policies are transformed and re-contextualized when they are adopted under specific circumstances, at individual

universities or by specific actors (e.g.. Ball et al. 2012; Degn 2015; Scholkmann 2020; Stensaker 2007). However, idea-translation has also recently been described for the transfer of supranational policies into national contexts (Donina & Hasanefendic 2019). In this sense, the EHEA-framework can be treated as a de-contextualized and condensed idea, whereas national policies – in relation to the EHEA – are considered as re-contextualized local interpretations.

Additionally, Durazzi (2018) has suggested that, even within the same overarching policy mechanisms, capitalist countries maintain their diversity. This means that, even given the common elements implemented as part of the Lisbon agreement, there is a need to understand different national aims and strategies. Therefore, knowing that all European states are implementing the Lisbon elements (Capano & Piattoni 2011) is not sufficient to understand what the particular national constellations aim for educating high level professionals and what strategies they apply to achieve these aims.. There is a need to examine national policies in order to understand how different European countries approach this educational process. To get a better insight, it is essential to look beyond the mechanisms of national higher education systems into the actual proposed aims by higher education policy as part of the higher education system as a triangular tension between markets, states and academia (Clark 1983; Durazzi 2018; Durazzi & Benassi 2020)

Based on our preceding arguments, our analysis treats policy texts as a durable and portable form of the debates that have led to their development (Ashwin and Smith 2015; cf. Sahlin & Wedlin 2008). Furthermore, they can be seen as reflecting a nation's higher education architecture (Karseth & Solbrekke 2016) and thus specific national contextual constraints. Therefore, they serve as both the impetus and the condensed outcome of policy-practice interaction (Vidovich 2004). Moreover, in their interplay with stakeholders' views and interpretations, policy texts provide a basis for the production, interpretation and implementation of policy (Smith 2018).

Whilst their importance is undoubted, studies using policy texts as a data source are relatively limited in the field of higher education (Saarinen 2008; Suspitsyna 2012). Where they have been used, the analyses have been focussed on governments' definitions of higher education marketization

(Boden and Nevada 2010; Collini 2012; Freedman 2011) and on particular definitions of what counts as a high quality undergraduate education (Ashwin et al. 2015; Smith 2018). They also tend to be focussed on a single national perspective (Smith 2018; Vingaard Johansen et al. 2017) rather than taking a comparative analysis of government aims for higher education. Whilst a recent study (Capano & Pritoni in press) has examined policies across countries, the focus was on the kinds of terms used in policy documents rather than a fine-grained comparison of the approaches taken in different countries.

To address this gap, in this article we focus on the comparison of national mechanisms for the education of high level professionals in England, Germany and the Netherlands between 2005 and 2015. By taking this comparative perspective we strive to isolate the phenomenon of transfer of the ideas of the EHEA into different national policies as a way of overcoming the limitations of viewing “the world only from the lens of that which is most familiar” (Arnove 2013, 21) and to act as a counter to the trend of undertaking large-scale comparisons which take less account of the differences between national policy contexts (Fairbrother 2007, 44). Instead, contextual conditions are a vital part of this perspective, which provide “assemblages of multiple discourses, practices, techniques, objects, and propositions that come together in particular places at particular times” (Sobe & Kowalczyk 2014, 27). In effort to answer the call by Durazzi (2018, 14) for a better understanding of “the constellation underpinning national trajectories of high skill formation”, we will follow this lead by first explaining the three national educational systems and then present the analysis and of higher education policy papers.

Three national higher education systems compared

The three countries included in this study all share the same overall European legislative framework, but have different steering mechanisms (Capano 2011; Maassen, Moen & Stensaker 2011). England provides a system that ranges between self-governance and steering at a distance, with the government varying in the level of detail in the aims of policies and tending not to specify the means by which its higher education policy aims should be achieved. The Netherlands provides a ‘steering at a distance’ mode providing a high level of detail about the aims of policy but a low level of

specification of how this should be achieved. Finally, Germany steers more procedurally with a high level of specification of how policies should be implemented but a low level of detail about the aims of policies. Given the differences in the steering mechanisms identified earlier, this article examines whether the national policies in the Netherlands, Germany and England differ in their aims for educating high level professionals and the ways in which they achieve this. Before, we set out the methods of the study, we will first set out the structures of each of the systems of higher education to provide an insight into the contexts in which the policies we analyse operate.

The *Dutch binary structure* consists of old universities, traditionally focussed on general education, and *hogescholen*, focussed on vocational education. Since 1992 higher vocational education is part of the higher education system (WHW 1992). For both higher education types, accreditation is provided by the national government delegated to the *Nederland-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie* (NVAO 2017). The influence of the Dutch national government is more at a distance than it was until the mid-1980s, but in the end the government decides on the size of higher education budgets and prescribes priorities through strategic agenda's (Griffioen 2013).

Similar to the Dutch System, *German Higher Education* follows a binary structure, with research universities and applied universities. Steering wise, the main responsibility in Germany lies with the governments of the 17 federal states (*Bundesstaaten*), which are sovereign in their capacity to set goals in the educational field (Capano 2011). The German Council of Sciences and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat; WR*) provides a common topical supra-structure through strategic advice (Bartz 2007; 2006). Policy is informed both by the non-binding papers from WR and by binding administrative agreements between federal government and federal states (*Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz, GWK*). Having adopted new funding models only slowly (Schimank and Lange 2009), nowadays universities are to set their own agendas, and to negotiate their budgets with the respective government of their federal state.

Universities in *England* are officially independent organisations although most of the funding they receive is either from the Government or from student fees. All universities are part of a unitary

system and it has been an explicit aim of recent policy for this to include all providers of higher education (BIS 2016). Higher Education policy is currently steered by the Higher Education minister through the Department for Education (DfE), although the ministry that is responsible for higher education has shifted over the time of our analysis from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) to the DfE. A recent development is that funding for undergraduate degree courses now comes directly through student fees, which are supported through government loans.

Method

There are three subquestions that underpin our examination of whether the policies in the Netherlands, Germany and England differ in their aims for educating high level professionals and the ways in which they achieve this. These are: (1) How do the policy texts define high level professionals? (2) How do the policy texts characterize the kind of education needed to develop these professionals? (3) What mechanisms do the policy texts identify for ensuring the education of high level professionals?

Sample of policy documents

All the selected documents were considered to have nation-wide impact, were written by the relevant national or federal government body, or by relevant funding or advisory bodies that are known for their large influence on legislation. Therefore, all selected documents can be considered valid indicators of governmental action, although the shape that policy takes in practice very much depends on the “authorized choices” (Colebatch 2006, 11) as well as local interpretations stakeholders make based on their own interpretation of the policy framework provided (Mittelre et al. 2015). Located at the marco-level of comparative case material, they allow for a comparison of similar practices across different national sites and, by choosing them respectively, allow for an analysis and comparison of changes over time (cf. Bartlett & Vavrus 2020). The included documents were used in their original language, Dutch, German and English, which are also the native languages of one of the three authors. The differences in the three national systems outlined earlier resulted in different choices of documents for each country.

For the *Dutch perspective* the last three Ministerial Strategic Agenda’s (2007; 2011; 2015) were included. These documents provide the formal direction to higher education as authored by the

Minister of Education approved by the Dutch parliament. Higher Education Institutions' own strategic plans are in practise framed in line with these national strategic documents. Additionally, three reports of formal Ministerial advisory boards were included based on their focus themes on the higher education system in general and/or high skilled professionals in particular: the report by *the Commissie Toekomstbestendig Hoger Onderwijs Stelsel* (2010), also called the Veerman Report; the report by the *Onderwijsraad* (2014) about educating more innovative professionals through applied higher education and the report by the *Adviesraad voor Wetenschap, Technologie en Innovatie* (AWTI 2015) about the integration between research and higher education. Dutch higher education strategic policy documents and advisory reports often combine perspectives of higher education and research policy. For this study research policy was excluded for analysis.

For *Germany*, the duality of federal and national legislative structures resulted to the inclusion of the following documents: On the national level the German Council of Sciences and Humanities (*Wissenschaftsrat, WR*) is commissioned by the federal government to provide strategic advice for all 17 states. Included were the WR-recommendation on the improvement of the quality of higher education teaching and learning (WR 2008) and the WR-recommendation on the relation between higher education and the labour market (WR 2015). While the WR recommendations are formally non-binding, their relevance as sources of national policy steering unfolds in connection with the binding administrative agreements of the Joint Science Conference of the Federal Educational Ministers (*Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz, GWK*). The administrative agreements mainly regulate the amount of funding national and federal government will invest to advance higher education (Baumgarth, Henke and Pasternack 2016). The administrative agreement on the the 'Hochschulpakt 2020' (GWK 2009) and on the joint programm for better study conditions and more quality in teaching (GWK 2010) were included in this study.

The *English analysis* was based on government policy statements, normally contained in 'White Papers', which set out proposals for future legislation. The documents included are the New Labour government's 'Higher Ambitions'(BIS 2009), which set the context for the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance, the coalition government's 'Students at the Heart of

the System' (BIS 2011), which responded to the Browne Review's report, the Conservative government's 2015 Green paper (BIS 2015) and 2016 White paper (BIS 2016).

Procedure

All documents were qualitatively analysed in an inductive and iterative procedure that was focused on identifying the aims and strategies for educating high level professionals in each society. This analysis was based on the assumption that policy documents "have the power to create new – and reinforce existing – beliefs and ideologies in society" (Grant 2019, 66). In the first step of the analysis, the selected papers were read by the respective author of that country and coded for answers to three subquestions. Next, the codes were compared to ensure that we had focused on the same objects in our analysis. Finally, the outcomes of the analysis from the three countries were compared (for similar approaches to the analysis of policy texts see Smith, 2018; Suspitsyna, 2012; Vingaard Johansen, et al., 2017). The advantage of our focus on three countries was that it meant it was possible to focus on understanding the relations between elements within each system and comparing these rather than only focusing on the terms used as is the case in studies based on a larger group of countries (Capano & Pritoni, in press).

Findings

The findings are presented in terms of the three subquestions identified earlier: (1) How do the policy texts define high level professionals? (2) How do the policy texts characterize the kind of education needed to develop these professionals? (3) What mechanisms do the policy texts identify for ensuring the education of high level professionals ?

Defining high level professionals

Our analysis showed that the policy documents of all three countries define high level professionals as graduates of higher education. The Dutch documents define graduates of higher education in terms of the ways in which they use their knowledge to contribute to wider society as well as the economy:

“The base of a healthy knowledge society is a well-trained body of professional workers. If we want to ensure our future prosperity and welfare as many people as possible need to be able to work on a high knowledge level” (MoE 2007, p. 7).

This notion of the connection between university graduates and economic prosperity was present throughout all documents. However, both the Veerman Report and the 2011 Strategic Agenda did not elaborate their intentions for higher education beyond the presumed connection between talent and economic prosperity, while they explained in details how they intended to model higher education to achieve these aims. The 2011 Strategic Agenda stated a difference between graduates from applied universities, who needed “to be able to contribute to innovation of professional practice” (p. 5) and research intensive university which is focussed on academic development and provides graduates “who learn to understand theories and find verification or falsification” (p. 6).

While the 2014 *Onderwijsraad* document confirmed the need for more innovative professionals, this report was more detailed about the knowledge and skills for professionals educated through applied universities, related to labour market success and defined through more generic competencies such as analytic, research and reflective abilities (p. 9). In the report, research abilities are seen particularly important in the knowledge economy (p. 10). The importance of research abilities was also confirmed by the 2015 AWTI report: “Such research abilities are essential for the use and interpretation of large amounts of data and sometimes contradictory knowledge with which professionals at this level need to work with” (p. 17). This focus was confirmed by the 2015 Strategic Agenda (p. 8). The more recent Dutch documents combine the knowledge economy perspective with the emancipation function of higher education (Onderwijsraad 2014, 11) with an explicit dual responsibility on socialization and professional development in the 2015 Strategic Agenda (p. 11). All the Dutch documents present a sense that higher education need to result in high level professionals who are well-trained, can handle complexities and international settings which is needed for economic prosperity while they also become good citizens.

While the Dutch definition for professionals is not too different from the German perspective, there is a shift in focus where graduates in Germany have the explicit responsibility to act. The strategic papers by the German Council since 2008 have placed the purpose of higher education as educating professionals who are able to find solutions for the challenges associated with technical, economic or societal change, and to push forward change through innovation (e.g. WR 2015, 96ff.; WR 2008, 18). Specifically, a broad vision is conveyed of graduates' knowledge and skills, including the ability to reflect upon complex problems on basis of scientific and scholarly reasoning and methodological knowledge. Accordingly, higher education students are expected to learn to deal with the uncertain and provisional nature of scientific knowledge, and to learn how to make use of scholarly thinking techniques in order to deal with ill-structured problems (WR 2015, 96f.). In the administrative agreements by the Joint Science Conference, this overall vision is broken down into strategic goals which aim at strengthening universities' role in the education of knowledgeable professionals by increasing teaching and supervision capacities to support this vision (GWK 2010, 2; GWK 2009, 1).

The English documents show a strong sense that universities are educating students for the benefit of the students, so that they can contribute to the economy. The nature of this contribution will be defined by the economy. In *'Higher Ambitions'* (BIS 2009), there is also a sense of there being a wider benefit to society that is produced by students' engagement with universities (and steered by government incentives): "What unites all our universities is the need to continue to equip this country to prosper in a rapidly changing world" (BIS 2009, 5). However, in the later documents Higher Education is presented very much in terms of an investment for students (and steered by student choice), which it is expected to "lead to a better chance of being employed and an average net lifetime earnings premium comfortably over £100,000 compared to holding 2 or more A Levels" (BIS 2016, 42). Additionally, the 2016 White Paper made clear that excellent teaching in particular should lead to employment and higher earnings: "There is of course more to university than financial gain, but the idea that excellent teaching occurs in a vacuum, independent of its impact on students' future life chances, is not one we can or should accept" (BIS 2016, 43). Overall, the policy documents

emphasise the government's intention to address the mismatch between the skills employers feel they need and the skills that graduates offer.

Overall, in the English documents there was a sense, which grew stronger over time, that what defines higher level professionals is driven by the demands of employers whereas in the Dutch and German documents there was a much greater sense that the transformation of students into high level professionals changes their thinking and increases their ability to innovate professional practice. In the German setting the graduates were additionally expected to actively change the practices of their employers and therefore of society.

The education of high level professionals

This section of findings focuses on the second subquestion by examining how national policy documents characterize the education of high level professionals.

The highest level of detail was found in the Dutch on the framing of higher education, in particular on the importance of the connection between education and research as educational context. Often a connection to societal partners was seen as a way of offering a high quality education for future professionals. The 2007 Strategic Agenda states:

“A solid interaction between educational programmes, research and employers improves educational quality as well as the quality of professional action. Improving this interaction requests of teaching intensive universities that they involve their students in design and development and other types of applied research. Research activities of teaching intensive universities need to be further developed in close connection to educational programmes” (MoE 2007, 11).

The different reports of the advisory bodies between 2010 and 2015 all attempted to make a clearer connection between research and education, which often involved collaboration with regional partners. The 2010 Veerman Report provided less detail on how professionals should be educated, but still stated (p. 31): “Research is important for education because it educates towards reflection on professional practice and a searching attitude”. In the 2011 Strategic Agenda this connection was also

defined as central in disciplinary curricula of “research-intensive universities” (MoE 2011, 7), which was generalized to all higher education in the 2015 document (MoE 2015):

“The ambition of 2025 is that [all] institutions for higher education have connected research, teaching and practice on all levels” (MoE 2015).

This connection was considered to provide a stimulating environment for education, about which more generic was said:

“Stimulating education will get students out of their comfort zone and will therefore prepare students for an unpredictable world” (MoE 2015, 11).

Where the Dutch policy documents provide direction on the structure of the connection between research and teaching as foundation for educating professionals, the German documents position scientific reasoning as a fundamental principle of the education of professionals. Through this focus the German documents position the quality of teaching and the quality of the subject matter as inseparably intertwined and therefore provide a focus on the content of higher education:

“[...] The principle of scientific reasoning distinguishes higher education studies from any other form or professional training. It’s application ensures the development of reflection and judgement as well as substantial knowledge and systematic competences, and prepares students for working in professional fields which are open, non-predictable, rich in affordances and require self-directed and responsible problem-solving based on both theoretical and methodological knowledge” (Wissenschaftsrat 2008, 18).

Critical thinking, scientific reasoning and scholarly competence are recommended as instructional practices based on the Humboldtian notion of a *unity of research and teaching* (WR 2008, 18f.; WR 2015, 95f.). This is further operationalized in a notion of higher education providing the two-fold qualification of being able to become a researcher or enter the work force outside university as a knowledgeable professional (WR 2015, 97). WR 2015 states:

“(...) [Students] must be capable to make use of their scientific and scholarly competence also outside the university. For that we need to implement authentic learning opportunities that allow for knowledge application and transfer. Only then academics will be able to

develop the flexibility, self-directed learning capacity and innovativeness that are required in the knowledge society” (Wissenschaftsrat 2015, 95f).

Both the GWK 2009 and the GWK 2010 break those goals down to a commitment for higher investments “to hire more academic personnel, especially in universities of applied sciences and in STEM-programms” (GWK 2009, 1); “to increase the numbers of higher education teaching staff”; for the “support for universities for the qualification and further development of their teaching personnel and for the assurance and development of high-quality teaching” (GWK 2010, 2).

Across all of the English policy documents, it was clear that universities were positioned as autonomous institutions and that the Government did not see its role as setting institutional missions or shaping institutions’ approaches to supporting students (e.g. BIS 2011, 66). The 2016 White Paper (BIS 2016, 43) takes this further by emphasising that the Government’s focus was on the outcomes of excellent teaching, regardless of how they are delivered. However, the Government did highlight elements of a high-quality education:

“We expect higher education to deliver well-designed courses, robust standards, support for students, career readiness and an environment that develops the ‘soft skills’ that employers consistently say they need. These include capacity for critical thinking, analysis and teamwork, along with the vital development of a student’s ability to learn” (BIS 2016, 43).

In terms of opening the sector to new providers, this was an explicit aim of the White Paper (BIS 2016, 42) as a way of increasing choice and value for money:

“Widening the range of high-quality higher education providers stimulates competition and innovation, increases choice for students, and can help to deliver better value for money. Our aspiration is to remove all unnecessary barriers to entry into higher education, and move from parallel systems to a level playing field, with a clearer choice for students [..]”.

Overall, the English policy texts suggested that the quality of teaching, and with it the place of research within that teaching, would be shaped by the degree programmes that students choose to study, and did not give further detail about how these programs should be designed. In contrast, the

Dutch policy writings provide direction for the setup of the structure of higher education by defining the balance between research and teaching. The German policy papers provide direction by defining both the shape and design of education to include research capability, personal development and professional qualifications. However, in all cases the concrete design of programs, and especially the balance between these perspectives, was left to the universities.

The mechanisms for ensuring the for education high level professionals

This section considers the last subquestion examining the mechanisms for ensuring the education of high level professionals . There were different mechanisms in the three countries.

In the Dutch documents the mechanism appeared to be a partnership between the government and higher education institutions. The 2007 Strategic Agenda shows a Dutch government strategy for steering higher education that combines the setting of rather detailed aims with the higher education institutions responsible for the realization of these aims. The national government provided financial incentives to ensure the requested direction for action on some formulated aims, again without defining how to achieve these aims. For example:

“To improve the quality and student involvement first of all is the responsibility of the institutions within the financial means provided. The national government intends to increase this responsibility through focussed financial incentives” (MoE 2007, 27).

This strategy was confirmed in the advisory and ministerial documents between 2010 and 2014, with the 2010 The 2015 AWTI Report (p. 43-44) suggests that the requested changes “are first of all the responsibility of the higher education institutions but should not completely be left to the higher education institutions”, and that “sufficient external incentives are needed to create, perpetuate and support the requested changes”. The ‘external incentives’ highlighted are government policy incentives. The 2015 Strategic Agenda showed the same balance of responsibilities but adds a new actor: The student who is considered “to take more responsibility for their education. The quality of education is considered also dependent of the substantive contribution of students”.

In the German policy documents, higher education institutions are identified as the key mechanism for educating high level professionals. The policy documents define higher education institutions as the bearers of knowledge development and bearers of cultural achievements (WR 2015, 49). With that, they are seen as not only providing formal qualifications for complex and knowledge-intensive professional activities, but also as contributing to the continuous development of the world of employment. Their responsibility is not only to produce employable professionals but also to define and shape the professions of the future:

“The notion of employability is therefore not only related to the affordances and necessities of the present labour market, but also to these of the future” (WR 2015, 49).

In the administrative agreements there is no direct reference to the future role of universities. However, indirectly they make a clear statement in the sense that both in the 2009 and 2010 agreement (substantial) additional funding was allocated to universities by both the federal government. However, since the respective resources are not part of global budgeting but provide additional funding, this can be seen as an attempt to increase the influence of national steering policies on the further development of higher education by liaising directly with individual universities.

The English documents position the mechanism for ensuring the education of high level professionals outside of higher education institutions. Although all the English documents emphasise the importance of student choice, employer preferences and competition between universities, the nature of this emphasis changes over time. In ‘*Higher Ambitions*’ (BIS 2009) and ‘*Students at the Heart of the System*’ (BIS 2016), there is also a sense that the government had a role in supporting a diverse system that offered a variety of flexible routes for students to study. Whereas in the 2015 Green paper and the 2016 White paper this role is largely absent and instead the sense is that both purpose and directions of higher education should be determined by student choice, employer preferences and competition between universities. For example, the 2016 White Paper (BIS 2016, 43) argues:

“We need to ensure that our higher education system continues to provide the best possible outcomes. These come from informed choice and competition. We must provide incentives

for all institutions to improve and to focus on what matters to students, society and the economy”.

This competition is seen as driven by student choice informed by student satisfaction and graduate employability statistics. Crucially, in the English documents it is for students to judge whether the ways of educating them are of high quality. The intention appears to be that robust and comparable information would help students to create their own coherent picture of where teaching excellence exists and how it compares to what is on offer elsewhere (BIS, 2016, 44). Also, engagement with research is seen as only one possible source of evidence-informed teaching.

The three countries differ in the mechanisms that are identified for ensuring the education of high level professionals. In Germany, higher education institutions are seen as the key mechanism and their agency stretches to include shaping professionalism in society. In the Dutch setting, the mechanism is a partnership between higher education institutions and the government, in which the the government uses financial power to shape the direction of higher education institutions. In the English setting, the mechanism is external to higher education institutions, who are expected to respond to the direction provided by the demands of students and employers.

Conclusion and Discussion

The present paper compared how policy texts from the Netherlands, Germany and England characterize the education of professionals through the higher education system. With higher education systems considered as a triangular tension between markets, states and academia (Capano & Piattoni 2011; Clark 1983; Durazzi 2018), this article focused on the state’s policy intentions for higher education in these three nations. Although the state as legislative bodies in all three countries formally have similar policy making responsibilities for higher education, the findings show substantial differences in the definition of high level professionals, the nature of education that is required to produce these professionals, and the mechanisms by which the production of these professionals is ensured.

The findings show that all three state's policy documents see a role for higher education in educating high level professionals. While this currently seems logical, educating professionals beyond the medical, legal and religious fields has not always been considered a governmental responsibility (Griffioen 2013; Rupp 1997). However, our study shows that the definition of high level professionals differs between the three countries. In the Netherlands, professionals are defined by their characteristics needed for economic prosperity and good citizenship. In the English setting, the governments' policy documents do not provide a clear definition and expect the economy to define high level professionals. In Germany, educated professionals are programmatically described as being able to innovate and shape rather than to simply react to the affordances of the world of employment.

Differences between the three countries were also found in the nature of the education that was positioned as required in order to produce high level professionals. Where the English state considers the higher education institutions autonomous in their setup, the Dutch documents propose a connection between research and education as essential for educating professionals and provides details of the structure of this connection. The German policy documents describe elements of higher education similar to the Dutch system, in this case through proposing the Humboldtian unity of research and education at its core. However, the German documents also define elements of the content by positioning scientific reasoning as the core element of higher education, while leaving the shape of this connection to the autonomy of the universities.

In terms of the mechanism that ensures the production of high level professionals, previous research suggests that to achieve durability in policy, the three stakeholders in the higher education system – state, market and higher education institutions – need a certain interactive balance of agency and power (Capano 2011; Clark 1983; Durazzi 2018). The findings in this study suggest that the three countries do not aim to achieve the same balance between the stakeholders.

The English case shows a government focused on reducing its own influence as well as the influence of higher education institutions, by firmly assigning power and agency to the market. This effort may in the short run provide the economy with professionals. However, it seems potentially

problematic in terms of developing professionals who will seek to develop an inclusive democratic society, since the underlying notions of its steering mechanism go even further than Friedman (1955) in removing government from having a role in ensuring that society has the professionals that it needs. Further longitudinal and comparative research could provide insight into the nature and seriousness of this risk.

In the German setting, the agency given to the (collective) higher education institutions suggests a limitation of both the governments' and the markets' agency. This perspective provides higher education with the autonomy to help shaping reality and not simply respond to reality. However, considering this inherent self-referentiality, the risk of this system is that the views of other societal stakeholders are not equally represented and therefore can be slow (Krücken 2003). The policy documents included in this analysis show also an increase in the agency of the federal government through financial incentives, which can be interpreted as a step to a further management-driven governing structure (Reihlen & Wetzlaff 2014). However, the combination of increasing state funding on the one hand and the positioning of university graduates as shapers of society in the policy papers on the other shows that the German government regards universities the driving force when it comes to training competent graduates.

Finally, the Dutch setting still assigns large agency to the national government through legislation as well as financial incentives, making the higher education system potentially sensitive to changes in the political make-up of the Government.

So while all three national higher education systems are part of the same European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and while the legislative bodies (being national or federal) have similar responsibilities, the three countries show differences in aims, setup and agency when it comes to educating high level professionals through higher education. This confirms previous studies which highlight the mediating impact of national policies (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007) and the diversity of policies in different European countries (Durazzi 2018). Our findings also highlight the importance of understanding the way policy documents portray the relations between different elements of the system as well as simply

examining the terms as tends to happen in studies involving a larger number of countries (Capano & Pritoni in press).

Given that the EHEA was created to ensure equality and comparability between European higher education systems, this finding is important because it highlights the need to examine the more detailed strategic and visionary perspectives of national policies in order to gain a comparative understanding of higher education systems. This study could be extended to include all three elements of the higher education system – government, market and higher education institutions – in order to achieve this level of detail for all stakeholders. Additionally the enactment of policy and written documents needs to be considered. Whilst policy documents do provide insight into the higher education architecture (Karseth & Solbrekke 2016) and are the most durable carriers of strategic direction (Ashwin & Smith 2015), the differences in aims, strategies and agency found in policy documents do not necessarily lead to actual different practices (Bleiklie & Kogan 2007). Therefore, further comparative research could examine how the differences identified in this article appear to play out in higher education practices and the impact of these practices on production of high level professionals as an important outcome of higher education. Whilst the European Higher Education Area appears to have common goals in terms of the intended outcomes of higher education, this study shows how the organizing structures provided for higher education can impact on which actors are positioned as responsible for producing future professionals as well as the type of professionals they intend to produce.

References

- Adviesraad voor Wetenschap Technologie en Innovatie (AWTI). (2015). *Verwevenheid van Onderzoek en Hoger Onderwijs. Eenheid in Verscheidenheid*. Retrieved from Den Haag: <http://awti.nl/publicaties/verwevenheid-van-hoger-onderwijs-en-onderzoek/item767>
- Arnove, R. F. (2013). Introduction: Reframing Comparative Education: The Dialectic of the Global and the Local. In R. F. Arnove, C. A. Torres, & S. Franz (Hrsg.), *Comparative education. The dialectic of the global and the local* (Fourth edition, S. 7–29). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Ashwin, P., & Smith, K. (2015). Researcher creations? The positioning of policy texts in higher education research. *Higher Education*, 69(6), 1007-1018.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., Hoskins, K., & Perryman, J. (2012). *How Schools do Policy. Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools*. London: Routledge.

- Bartlett, L., & Vavrus, F. (2020). Comparison in Qualitative Research. In L. Bartlett & F. Vavrus, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.621>
- Bartz, O. (2006). *Wissenschaftsrat und Hochschulplanung. Leitbildwandel und Planungsprozesse in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland zwischen 1957 und 1975*. Universität zu Köln: Dissertation an der Philosophischen Fakultät.
- Bartz, O. (2007). *Der Wissenschaftsrat: Entwicklungslinien der Wissenschaftspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland 1957-2007*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.
- Baumgarth, B., Henke, J., & Pasternack, P. (2016). *Inventur der Finanzierung des Hochschulsystems Mittelflüsse, Kontroversen und Entwicklungen im letzten Jahrzehnt* (Bd. 001). Hans Böckler Stiftung. http://www.boeckler.de/pdf/p_studfoe_wp_1_2016.pdf
- Bleiklie, I., & Kogan, M. (2007). Organization and Governance of Universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 20, 477-493.
- Department of Business Innovations, and Skills (BIS). (2009) *Higher Ambitions: The Future of Universities in a Knowledge Economy* London: The Stationary Office.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2011) *Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2015) *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills.
- Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2016) *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business Innovation and Skills
- Boden, R. and M. Nedeava. 2010. Employing discourse: universities and graduate 'employability'. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25: 37-54.
- Capano, G. (2011). Government continues to do its job: A comparative study of governance shifts in the higher education sector. *Public Administration*, 89(4), 1622-1642.
- Capano, G., & Pritoni, A. (in press). What really happens in higher education governance? Trajectories of adopted policy instruments in higher education over time in 16 European countries. *Higher Education*, 1-22.
- Capano, G., & Piattoni, S. (2011). From Bologna to Lisbon: the political uses of the Lisbon 'script' in European higher education policy. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 18(4), 584-606.
- Clark, B. R. (1983). *The higher education system*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Colebatch, H.K. What work makes policy?. *Policy Sci* 39, 309–321 (2006).
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-006-9025-4>
- Collini, S. 2012. *What are universities for?* London: Penguin Books.
- Commissie Toekomstbestendig Hoger Onderwijs Stelsel. (2010). *Differentieren in drievoud. Omwille van kwaliteit en verscheidenheid in het hoger onderwijs*. Retrieved from Den Haag:
<https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2010/04/13/advies-van-de-commissie-toekomstbestendig-hoger-onderwi>
- Conference of Ministers responsible for higher education (2015) *Yerevan Communiqué*.
<http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/YerevanCommuniqueFinal.pdf>
- Czarniawska, B., & Joerges, B. (1996). Travel of Ideas. In B. Czarniawska-Joerges & G. Sevón (Hrsg.), *Translating organizational change* (S. 13–48). Walter de Gruyter.
- Degn, L. (2015). Translating Governance Ideas in Danish Higher Education. *Higher Education Policy*, 28(3), 295–313. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2014.12>
- Donina, D., & Hasanefendic, S. (2019). Higher Education institutional governance reforms in the Netherlands, Portugal and Italy: A policy translation perspective addressing the homogeneous/heterogeneous dilemma. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 73(1), 29–44.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12183>
- Durazzi, N. (2018). The political economy of high skills: higher education in knowledge-based labour markets. *Journal of European Public Policy*. doi:10.1080/13501763.2018.1551415
- Durazzi, N., & Benassi, C. (2020). Going Up-Skill: Exploring the Transformation of the German Skill Formation System. *German Politics*, 29(3), 319–338.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09644008.2018.1520840>

- Fairbrother, G. P. (2007). Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches to Comparative Education. In M. Bray, B. Adamson, & M. Mason (Hrsg.), *Comparative Education Research* (S. 39–62). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6189-9_2
- Freedman, D. 2011. An introduction to education reform and resistance. In *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance*, ed. M. Bailey, and D. Freedman, 1-11. London: Pluto Press.
- Friedman M. (1955) The role of government in education. In: Solo R (ed) *Economics and the public interest*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick
- Grace, G. (2014). Professions, sacred and profane. In M. Young and J. Muller (eds) *Knowledge, expertise and the professions*. London: Routledge pp. 18-30.
- Graf, L. (2017). Combined modes of gradual change: The case of academic upgrading and declining collectivism in German skill formation. *Socio-Economic Review*, mww044. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ser/mww044>
- Grant, A. (2019). *Doing Excellent Social Research With Documents*. London: Routledge.
- Griffioen, D. M. E. (2013). *Research in Higher Professional Education: A Staff Perspective*. (PhD), University of Amsterdam, Amsterdam.
- Griffioen, D. M. E. (2019). *Higher Education's Responsibility for Balanced Professionalism. Methodology beyond Research*. (Inaugural lecture), Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, Amsterdam. Retrieved from <https://www.hva.nl/content/evenementen/oraties/2019/10/didi-griffioen.html>
- GWK (2009). *Verwaltungsvereinbarung zwischen Bund und Ländern gemäß Artikel 91 b Abs. 1 Nr. 2 des Grundgesetzes über den Hochschulpakt 2020 (zweite Programmphase)*. Retrieved from https://www.bmbf.de/files/verwaltungsvereinbarung_hochschulpakt_zweite_programmphase.pdf [26.11.2019]
- GWK (2010). *Verwaltungsvereinbarung zwischen Bund und Ländern gemäß Artikel 91 b Abs. 1 Nr. 2 des Grundgesetzes über ein gemeinsames Programm für bessere Studienbedingungen und mehr Qualität in der Lehre*. Retrieved from <https://www.gwk-bonn.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/Dokumente/Papers/Programm-Lehrqualitaet-Vereinbarung-2010.pdf> [26.11.2019]
- Ibarra-Colado, E. (2001). Considering 'New formulas' for a 'Renewed university': The Mexican experience. *Organization*, 8(2), 203-217.
- Jackson, D. (2014). Testing a model of undergraduate competence in employability skills and its implications for stakeholders, *Journal of Education and Work*, 27:2, 220-242.
- Karseth, B., & Solbrekke, T. D. (2016). Curriculum Trends in European Higher Education, The Pursuit of the Humboldtian University Ideas. In B. J. T. S. Slaughter (Ed.), *Higher Education, Stratification, and Workforce Development. Competitive Advantage in Europe, the US, and Canada*. (Vol. 45, pp. 215 - 233): Springer Science+Business Media.
- Krücken, G. (2014). Higher education reforms and unintended consequences: a research agenda. *Studies in Higher Education*, 39(8), 1439–1450. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.949539>
- Maassen, P., Moen, E., & Stensaker, B. (2011). Reforming higher education in the Netherlands and Norway: The role of the state and national modes of governance. *Policy Studies*, 32(5), 479–495. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2011.566721>
- Marginson, S. (2014). Higher education and public good. In P. Gibbs and R. Barnett (Eds.) *Thinking about higher education* (pp. 53-69). Springer International Publishing.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2007). *Het Hoogste Goed. Strategische agenda voor het hoger onderwijs-, onderzoek -en wetenschapsbeleid*. The Hague.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2011). *Kwaliteit in verscheidenheid. Strategische Agenda Hoger Onderwijs, Onderzoek en Wetenschap*. The Hague.
- Ministry of Education (MoE). (2015). *De waarde(n) van weten. Strategische Agenda Hoger Onderwijs en Onderzoek 2015-2025*. The Hague.
- Mitterle, A., Würmann, C. & Bloch, R. (2015) Teaching without faculty: policy interactions and their effects on the network of teaching in German higher education, *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 36:4, 560-577, DOI: 10.1080/01596306.2015.980489

- NVAO. (2017). Nederlands-Vlaamse Accreditatie Organisatie. Retrieved from <https://www.nvao.com/about-nvao>
- Onderwijsraad. (2014). *Meer innovatieve professionals*. Retrieved from Den Haag: <https://www.onderwijsraad.nl/publicaties/2014/meer-innovatieve-professionals/volledig/item7188>
- Reihlen, M., & Wenzlaff, F. (2014). Institutional Change in the German Higher Education System: From professional dominance to managed education. In A. Fayolle & D. T. Redford (Hrsg.), *Handbook on the Entrepreneurial University* (S. 112–135). Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Rupp, J. C. C. (1997). *Van oude en nieuwe universiteiten. De verdringing van Duitse door Amerikaanse invloeden op de wetenschapsbeoefening en het hoger onderwijs in Nederland, 1945-1995*. Den Haag: Sdu Uitgevers.
- Saarinen, T. (2008). Position of text and discourse analysis in higher education policy research. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33: 719-728.
- Sahlin, K., & Wedlin, L. (2008). Circulating ideas: Imitation, translation and editing. In R. Greenwood, C. Oliver, R. Suddaby, & K. Sahin (Hrsg.), *The SAGE handbook of organizational institutionalism* (S. 218–242). SAGE.
- Schimank, U., & Lange, S. (2009). Germany: A Latecomer to New Public Management. In C. Paradeise, E. Reale, I. Bleiklie, & E. Ferlie (Hrsg.), *University Governance* (Bd. 25, S. 51–75). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands. DOI: [10.1007/978-1-4020-9515-3_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9515-3_3)
- Scholkmann, A. (2020). Why don't we all just do the same? Understanding variation in PBL implementation from the perspective of Translation Theory. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Problem-Based Learning*, 14(2).
- Smith, K. (2018). Using multidimensional methods to understand the development, interpretation and enactment of quality assurance policy within the educational development community. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 173–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1342608>
- Sobe, N. W., & Kowalczyk, J. A. (2014). Exploding the Cube: Revisioning “Context” in the Field of Comparative Education. *Current Issues in Comparative Education*, 16(1), 6–12.
- Stensaker, B. (2007). Quality as Fashion: Exploring the Translation of a Management Idea into Higher Education. In D. F. Westerheijden, B. Stensaker, & M. J. Rosa (Hrsg.), *Quality Assurance In Higher Education* (Bd. 20, S. 99–118). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6012-0_4
- Suspitsyna, T. (2012). Higher Education for Economic Advancement and Engaged Citizenship: An Analysis of the U.S. Department of Education Discourse. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 83(1), 49–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2012.11777234>
- Vidovich, L. 2004. Global-national-local dynamics in policy processes: a case of 'quality' policy in higher education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 25: 341-354.
- Vingaard Johansen, U., Knudsen, F. B., Engelbrecht Kristoffersen, C., Stellfeld Rasmussen, J., Saaby Steffen, E., & Sund, K. J. (2017). Political discourse on higher education in Denmark: from enlightened citizen to homo economicus. *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(2), 264–277. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2015.1045477>
- Willems, D. (2017) *A University Education*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- WR (2008). Empfehlungen zur Qualitätsverbesserung von Lehre und Studium. Köln: Wissenschaftsrat.
- WR (2015). Empfehlungen zum Verhältnis von Hochschulbildung und Arbeitsmarkt (Bd. II). Bielefeld.