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Differences and Similarities in Comparative Higher Education Studies Proposals for a Methodological Framework

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Content

Introduction	2
Comparative higher education: some preliminary comments.....	4
A diachronic/synchronic approach to higher education policy	5
Diachrony, synchrony in the comparative method — How and Why.	10
Provisional conclusions	14
Bibliography	15

Introduction¹

In recent years, higher education has experienced major transformations. Changes have affected the types of relationships between political authorities and institutions of higher education, as well as the position of the universities within society. The literature provides a general picture of the challenges most, if not all, systems of higher education are confronted with (Clark 1998; Green *Ed.* 1997):

- quantitative and qualitative expansion of higher education,
- reduction of governmental financial contributions,
- changing relationships between higher education institutions and political authorities,
- emergence of new societal demands from those attending tertiary education and society at large, especially the economy,
- general concern for quality, efficiency and accountability.

These challenges are said to be common to all systems of higher education regardless of their size, structure or history. What tends to differ, however, is the type of answer they may provide. As Green and Hayward (1997: 6) put it: *"While the pressures and demands for change take on different shapes in each country, they are not bounded by national borders or geography (...) Each of these [the seven elements that push for transformation into HE] affects higher education differently in different settings, but that seems more a function of point in time than a difference in kind"*.

One way of assessing the actual veracity of this statement is to engage in cross-national comparisons. These should be able to give account of the differences and similarities of the policies developed in the several national settings and to place these differences/similarities within the broader context of their production: the national systems of higher education, their structure and organisation but also the organisation of the policy-making process.

Comparisons have been extensively used in higher education studies. Within the vast range of topics addressed, one can mention the organisational features of the field, the forms of internal and external governance, the patterns of funding or the modalities of access. These different *foci* attest of the variety of disciplines higher education, as a field of study, has borrowed and learnt from. Similarly, comparative studies in higher education also differ according to the methods used to give account of cross-national

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experiences. In this case, the differences stem in the number of units selected for comparison and the epistemological assumptions underlying the study.

The issue of the origins of higher education studies and the different types of comparative strategies adopted will be worth further discussion. For illustrative purpose, it is proposed to anchor this discussion within an ongoing research on how four European countries – England, The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland - are dealing with the issues of system differentiation and quality assurance in their respective systems of higher education. The choice of the countries is based on the observation that they are confronted with similar issues in their respective systems of higher education (more students, less money, concerns for accountability and efficiency etc). However, a closer look into the policies implemented shows intriguing differences, especially concerning the issues of quality assurance and system differentiation. In this perspective, a way of summarising the issue could be: similar problems - different answers².

The objective of the present paper is, therefore, twofold. First, to discuss the methodological framework used to investigate the reasons of these cross-national differences and, second, to locate this discussion within the broader spectrum of comparative higher education studies. For that purpose, I will proceed in three steps. First, Section 2 provides a brief discussion of comparative studies in higher education as a field of study will be presented. By doing so, it is intended to provide an overview of the disciplines that have most influenced the construction of higher education as a field of study. In Section 3, I then turn to the discussion of the synchronic and diachronic approaches in comparative higher education studies. This distinction implies to carefully define the concepts used when analysing similar structures and processes in

² For instance, England and the Netherlands experienced, from the early 1980s on, important transformations of their respective systems of higher education. These changes were characterised, among others, by changes in the political control of the institutions of higher education, new funding methodologies and increasing concern for quality, efficiency and accountability (Maassen and van Vught 1989; Williams 1997). On the other hand, in Spain and Switzerland debates about State/universities relationships, internal governance structure or accountability publicly emerged during the 1990s and the extent of the reforms has been more limited (Mora and Villareal 1996; Perellon 1999a).

Differences in shape are particularly evident in the policies related to system differentiation and quality assurance. For instance, in the mid-1960s England set up the Polytechnics as an alternative channel towards higher education (Pratt and Burgess 1974; Pratt 1997; Robinson 1968). This channel was abolished in 1992, thus leading to a “unified” system. This particular organisation of higher education, i.e. a unified system mainly composed of universities, is also present in Spain but as a result of a completely different history. On the contrary, in the Netherlands the distinction established in 1969 between universities and HBO (Hoger Beroepsonderwijs – Vocational “universities”) still exists and in Switzerland, so-called Universities of Applied Sciences have recently been established as alternatives to classic universities (Perellon 1999b; Weber 1998). Similarly, a quick glance at European experiences in the area of quality assurance also shows a number of differences among the four countries. This can be seen, for instance, in the number of actors responsible for quality assurance and their respective competencies; the presence or absence of central agencies to co-ordinate the entire process; the type of indicators used and the implications of the results concerning, among others, the funding of the system (Brennan *et al.* Eds 1994; Thune 1998).

different national settings. This can prove helpful when it comes to identify cross-national differences and/or similarities and to trace them back into a certain time period or environmental specificities.

Finally, based upon this diachronic/synchronic distinction, Section 4 will discuss the various types of comparative methods that have been developed in the field of higher education studies. For this particular purpose, a typology will be elaborated. This typology will not only help to distinguish among different approaches but will also question the dominant causal explanatory approach in the field of higher education studies.

Comparative higher education: some preliminary comments

In the last twenty years or so, studies in higher education have increased importantly. The rise of higher education as a political issue has led to the development of scientific enquiries to understand a particular object, institutions of higher education that, for a long time, had been regarded as untouchable fortresses. The approaches adopted for this type of studies have largely differed, ranging from, among others, empirically-based studies of students' access and success to more epistemological discussions of the meaning of higher education in the so called post-modern era. Together with the variety of approaches, the levels of analysis have also expanded from national case-studies to cross-national comparisons. The latter have helped to better understand the challenges most countries are facing and the way they cope with them. Concerning the approaches most studies have adopted, Mitter (1992) pertinently points out that the literature on comparative higher education is rarely linked to the other levels of education, i.e. primary and secondary, but more generally to other disciplines. In this respect, he argues that the history of higher education comparative studies is the perfect example of a "*cross-disciplinary academic area*" (Mitter 1992: 1789).

As far as theory is concerned, such a variety of approaches has led to import methods and concepts from other areas of knowledge. Among these areas, history and sociology occupy a important place, especially if one takes into account the in-depth socio-historical investigations into the formation of educational systems in different national environments (Archer 1979, Green 1990). History and sociology are just two examples of how different fields of knowledge have conceptually nurtured educational analysts. Alongside, one also needs to recognise the influence of administrative sciences, sociology of organisations and economics as a source of theoretical inspiration (Cohen *et al.* 1972; Friedberg and Musselin 1989; March and Olsen 1976; Mintzberg 1979; Pfeiffer and Salancik 1978; Williams 1992).

Political sciences and, more specifically, policy analysis have also entered the study of the field, shedding new light on the production and implementation of higher education policy. As a field of knowledge, policy analysis is composed of a wide range of disciplines, models and theories. As Wildawsky puts it:

"Policy analysis is an applied subfield whose contents cannot be determined by disciplinary boundaries but by whatever appears appropriate to the circumstances of the time and the nature of the problem" (Wildawsky 1979: 15). This position implies to follow a multidisciplinary approach to social problems, an approach able to take into account the conceptual tools of well institutionalised academic areas and to acknowledge the importance of the historical, societal, legal and institutional contexts within which national policies are formulated and implemented. Focusing specifically on higher education, Premfors (1992) points out that policy analysis *"(...) explores in a normative and prescriptive mode the concepts of policy formation, implementation, and evaluation across systems and institutions. It also encompasses research on particular policy initiatives, on the characteristics of planned change and the nature and sources of resistance to it"* (Premfors 1992: 1907).

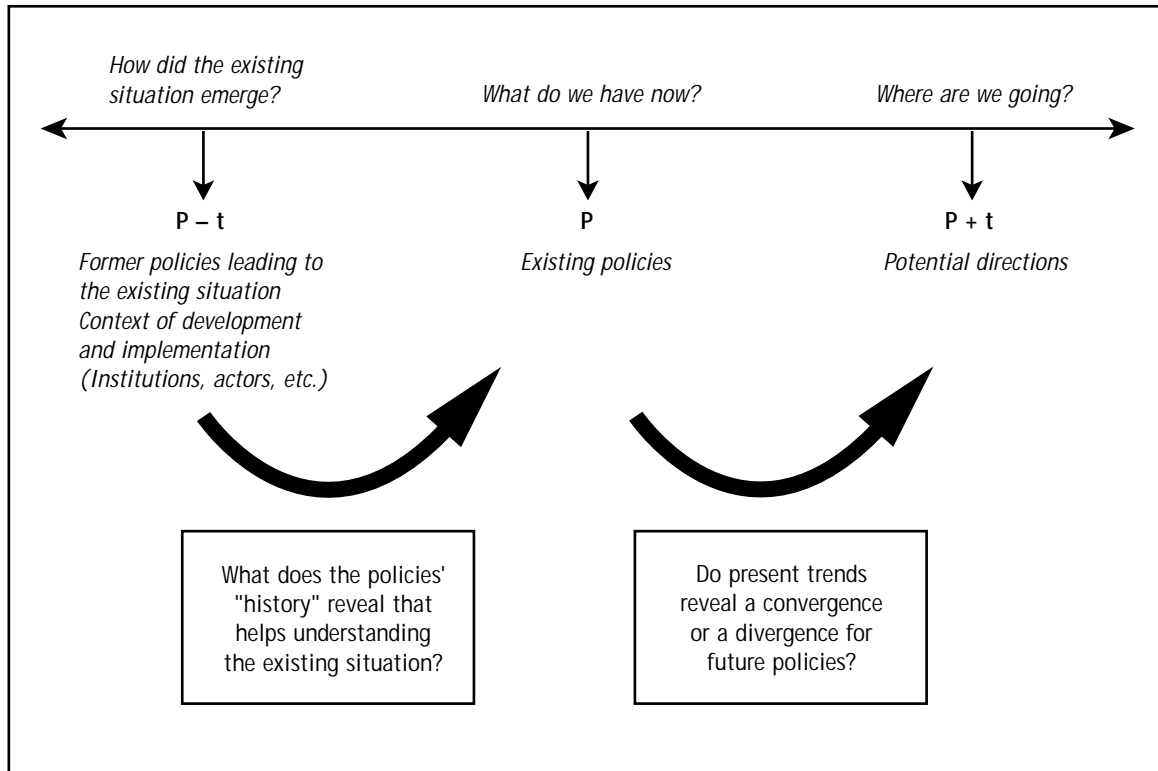
Consequently, it can be argued that while the object of analysis in higher education comparative studies belongs to higher education itself, the *foci*, methods and approaches have been, and still are, borrowed from a range of disciplines. Several theoretical devices have been derived from these multidisciplinary origins of higher education studies. Their prime objective is to account for differences and/or similarities in the policies formulated and implemented in various countries. However, one of the most significant obstacles when engaging in cross-national comparisons resides in the meaning given to the objects being compared. It is therefore crucial to be aware that such notions as, for instance, quality assurance or non-university sector often refer to completely realities. The coming section addresses this issue by discussing how a synchronic/diachronic approach can be fruitfully used when undertaking cross-national comparison of higher education policies.

A diachronic/synchronic approach to higher education policy

The study of cross-national differences and similarities requires to accurately look into the existing situation and the processes through which they have come to be what they are. This is not an easy task. The comparative concern makes it even harder insofar as it implies to built up common conceptual devices able to give account not only of different national realities but also of different levels of analysis. In addition, such a common conceptual framework will also need to provide sufficient support for the study of the trends towards convergence or divergence in national higher education policies.

For that purpose, the distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches constitutes an interesting basis. It does because it allows overcoming the before/after dichotomy, by re-introducing the notion of duration, and also by its availability to give account of two different analytical levels, i.e. the process and the moment. In effect, according to this view, a distinction has to be drawn between what refers to an ongoing *process*, and what refers to a particular *moment*. Far from being irreconcilable, these dimensions should be understood as two stages of the same intellectual effort. The synchronic perspective provides

the starting point for the enquiry, whereas the diachronic perspective allows for the reconstruction of the process through which current situations have come to be what they are. Additionally, thanks to the attention paid to the impact of national institutional features on policy formulation, the synchronic/diachronic approach can help to point out landmarks on potential future developments, thus questioning the actual convergence or divergence of higher education policies in the light of the “national variable”. This approach can be graphically sketched as follows:



Picture 1: Synchronic and diachronic. A methodological framework

As this schema implies, case-studies need to pay special attention to two different levels. The first level, summarised as P , is the existing situation in a given policy area. It implies to accurately describe the two policy domains, their ideational foundations, the context of their production as well as the instruments used for implementing the policies.

This first stage of the analysis, summarised as P , provides a static picture of what is being done in these policy areas. The purpose of this first stage is to describe the policy as accurately as possible according to a number of pre-defined categories. For instance, as far as quality assurance procedures are concerned, special attention should be paid to the structure of the bodies responsible for the process of quality control, the methodologies used, the purposes of the procedures and the use of the information collected.

The second stage, summarised as P - t, implies to analyse the emergence of the existing policies previously observed and described. For that purpose, the mechanisms through which ideas about the organisation of a given policy domain are actualised in particular policies have to be carefully studied. Among the points to be investigated, special attention will have to be paid to the different stages of the policy-making process, the actors involved as well as the broader national institutional features within which changes take place.

Since they are concerned with different analytical levels, a distinction must be drawn between the notions referring to a process and those referring to a particular moment. As regards to the latter, the study of cross-national differences and similarities need to pay special attention to concepts such as diversity and heterogeneity as well as to their direct antonyms, identity and homogeneity. As synchronic notions, they reflect a given situation, a static picture of a particular policy area. Table 1 below gives an overview of the differences that need to be kept in mind.

Synchronic	Synchronic	Diachronic		Synchronic
<i>What did we have?</i>	<i>What do we have Now?</i>	<i>Where are we going?</i>	<i>How can we go there?</i>	<i>What will we have then?</i>
Diversity/ Identity	Diversity/ Identity	Divergence/ Convergence	Differentiation/ de-differentiation	Diversity/ Identity
Homogeneity/ heterogeneity	Homogeneity/ heterogeneity	Heterogenisation/ Homogenisation	Diversification/ de-diversification	Homogeneity/ Heterogeneity
Past	Present	Future		

Table 1: Diachronic and synchronic concepts and their antonyms

This table should be understood as a conceptual complement to the methodological outline sketched above. It gives a clearer idea of how the study of a particular moment can be combined with the analysis of the process. In cross-national comparisons, this can prove helpful insofar as existing policies differ from country to country, thus implying to focus what potential future orientations may be.

This table, precisely, pays particular attention to the analysis of these potential orientations. The way they are referred to conceptually should not be seen as linear as it is displayed. On the contrary, the outcome of the fourth column (*What Will We Have Then?*) will depend on how national environments react to common challenges. In this sense, future inter-national convergence or divergence will need to be analysed from what can be observed nowadays and, through the analysis of the emergence of the existing situation in different countries, from the elements that have prevented or encouraged current international diversity or identity in policy-formulation. For that specific purpose, different types of concepts are needed, able to account for both the synchronic and diachronic perspectives.

As far as the synchronic perspective is concerned, the notions of diversity and heterogeneity have already been used in the literature (Birnbaum 1983; Huisman 1995; Meek *et al.* 1996). They share substantial similarities even if a qualitative distinction has to be applied inasmuch as diversity tends to emphasize less than heterogeneity the generality of the differences. Likewise, their respective antonyms, identity³ and homogeneity, share a lot in common as well. The main difference is that the latter more straightforwardly addresses the process through which a given situation has come to be what it is.

In order to analyse the emergence of existing policies reference has to be made to the notion of *duration*. Four main concepts can be used for this purpose: diversification, differentiation, divergence and heterogenisation. These concepts refer to the process through which policy diversity/heterogeneity or, on the contrary, policy identity/homogeneity can be reached. Let us briefly discuss their principal features.

The notions of diversification and differentiation are particularly useful for the study of national systems of higher education. They permit to assess whether and to what extent political authorities have or have not formulated and implemented binary policies, i.e. the setting up of a non-university sector of tertiary-level education. An important distinction can nonetheless be drawn between the two terms. This distinction is based on Huisman's analysis of programmatic diversity (Huisman 1995). For the Dutch scholar, the differentiation process is mainly concerned with the quantitative expansion of the number of units and does not refer to their particular internal characteristics. This point is important, for it lays down the basis for the distinction between the differentiation and the diversification processes. The latter encompasses "*an increase in the number of types; an increase in the number of types and/or dispersion of entities across these types; an increase of differences between entities or types*" (Huisman 1995: 51). Differentiation and diversification, thus, correspond to two opposite moments. The former mainly stresses the quantitative expansion of a particular analytical level, whereas the latter provides a more accurate

³ In the discussion of the diachronic/synchronic approach, the notion of identity is preferred to identity. There are two reasons for that. First, the notion of identity does not, as such, encompass the element of duration needed when dealing with moments and processes. The use of identity, thus, aims at stressing the fact that what can be observed, regarding the policies of differentiation and quality assurance as well as other policies, is the output of political and struggles. Second, the notion of identity principally refers to what something *is* and not to the extent to which it is "similar" to something else. As such it can not account for similarities among different elements in a policy domain.

view on qualitative aspects of such a numerical expansion. This point is particularly relevant for the setting up of non-university sectors as an answer to the massification of higher education and the extent to which they are being supported by the development of a real binary policy.

The notions of heterogenisation and divergence as well as their antonyms, homogenisation and convergence, are more valuable for the study of the trends that can be observed within a particular policy area. For instance, if a cross-national comparison of quality assurance policies reveals a higher degree of diversity, in the actors involved, the procedures put forward or the use of the information, it will be necessary to investigate the reasons of this divergence. Here attention could be paid, among others, to the structure of the policy-making process in the different countries as well their respective institutional architecture. Similarly, the use of diachronic concepts can also account for potential future orientations in different domains. In effect, through the analysis of past experiences, it can be possible to assess the extent to which the national variable can impose a certain configuration of policy formulation and policy making or, on the contrary, if it is permeable to macro trends.

To sum up, cross-national comparisons of higher education policies need to focus on existing situations as well as on the context of their particular production. The synchronic/diachronic approach permits both. As put forward in this section, the combination of moment and process allows for a clear description of current national policies and sheds light on how these policies have emerged. It therefore becomes possible not only to point out cross-national differences and/or similarities, but also to assess the extent to which the latter actually mirror other configurations. These can stem, for instance, from the organisation of higher education in different countries, the meaning given to "similar" issues in various national environments or the political organisation of the countries under investigation.

The way these different elements are combined and the methods used for this particular purpose are examined in the coming section. The latter is structured around a typology of comparative studies in administrative sciences elaborated by Page (1995) and imported by Kogan into the field of higher education (Kogan 1996). This categorisation seems particularly relevant to discuss how students of higher education have dealt with two common issues in comparative studies, i.e. the number of units taken into account and the epistemological assumptions underpinning every study. The synchronic/diachronic approach presented above is integrated in the discussion, thus showing how it differentiates from other types of methodologies used in comparative studies in higher education.

Diachrony, synchrony in the comparative method

How and Why.

As mentioned in section two, comparisons in the field of higher education studies find their roots in the methodologies developed in other disciplines. In this sense, it is possible to point out two main elements that can distinguish the sorts of comparative studies being done. The first is the type of methods used and generally opposed quantitative to qualitative approaches. The second distinctive element refers to the number of units taken into account, i.e. the number of elements compared. *Small N* studies provide precise discussion and precise information about these cases but find it hard to generalise the results they obtain. On the contrary, studies that incorporate a large number of units of analysis allow for theoretically based generalisations but less specific information. The reasons for choosing one approach instead of the other can vary: purposes of the research, amount of information available, language skills, time and resources availability and personal interest. All these elements play a role when it comes to decide how many countries, policies or time-periods the comparison will encompass.

Referring to the *small N vs. large N* dilemma, Page (1995) reminds us that they are just to poles of the continuum within comparative studies. There is no point in trying to establish any kind of hierarchy between them. However, as he continues, *[w]hile it is possible to conceive of comparative studies of public administration as ranged on a continuum, it is nevertheless possible to set out some discrete points along this continuum*" (Page 1995: 127). From this perspective, he distinguishes among four different types of studies labelled as "comparisons": single case studies, juxtapositions, thematic comparisons and causal comparisons. This particular categorisation of comparative studies is followed by Kogan in the field of higher education (Kogan 1995). By so doing, Kogan provides a useful framework within which to locate the different types of comparative studies developed in the field of higher education. This attempt is important inasmuch as it is one of the rare proposals to categorise the different types of studies. In effect, there are not many researches that have tried to classify, in one way or another, the vast amount of literature produced.

In the field of higher education studies, typologies certainly exist, regarding, for instance, the nature of systems of higher education (Clark 1983) or the types of quality assurance that are developed (Harman 1998). Page's typology permits to address the issue of the number of units taken into account as well as the epistemological assumptions underlying the different types of studies. The four levels presented, however, encompass different perspectives and, some of them can be cause for concern when it comes to develop cross-national comparisons. Page's typology is discussed in more detail in the coming paragraphs. The objective of this discussion is twofold: to assess the extent to which they can be considered as comparative dimensions and to consider how they can accommodate the diachronic/synchronic approach presented in section 3.

The first type of comparative studies referred to by Page are those focusing exclusively on a *single* case. According to Kogan (1996: 396), single case studies can be characterised as comparative inasmuch as "they add to knowledge in specifying what it is that marks off one set of administrative arrangements from another" (Kogan 1996: 396). Rose (1991: 447), sees single-case studies as *implicitly comparisons* inasmuch as they refer to concepts that can be apply in other national environments. By doing so, they differentiate themselves from so-called *explicit comparisons*, where similar concepts are used in several national environments. From this point of view, single-case studies help applying similar concepts in a particular location, thus providing new knowledge to the corpus of existing comprehension. In parallel to concept-testing, single-case studies can prove useful in the process of defining concepts. Here, attention would be paid at developing a given concept that seems to be particularly relevant in a given national environment, which acts as the empirical basis to build up the concept. For instance, the Netherlands seem to have been the paradigmatic case, at least in the European context, for the *steering-at-a-distance* type of state/university relationships. Van Vught (1991; 1997) and Kickert's (1995) analysis of this specific area provided extensive and thoroughly informed data about the new steering model as well as on the entire political and social transformations of Dutch higher education that came with it. Single-case studies do not generally have a pre-defined focus but can, on the contrary, concentrate on a range of topics according to the interests of the researcher or the availability of the information. From this point of view, it can be argued that single-case studies constitute more than valuable contributions to the understanding of specific areas of a given national environment. However, they should be considered more as monographs rather than real comparisons. They can prove both empirically and theoretically useful but will remain *comparative in essence*, as long as they are not integrated in a wider corpus of studies on the same topic with identical concepts in other national environments, allowing researchers to look for similarities or differences across units, places and time. For this precise reason, the extent to which single-case analyses can be considered as comparative studies is questionable. Even Rose's distinction between implicit and explicit comparisons, taken up both by Page and Kogan, does not lift doubts that single case studies are not considered as comparative per se but as a basis for future comparison. It is the *use* that is made of these studies that confers them the denomination of comparisons and not the approach they adopt.

The second type of comparative studies referred to by Page are defined as *juxtapositions*. According to the author, the latter can be seen as "a collection of essays usually around a common theme but which lacks the coherence found in the thematic comparison – a coherence provided either through tight editing, through close collaboration between co-authors or through single authorship" (Page 1995: 131). Basically, comparative studies of this type are relevant for the concise cross-national information they provide by putting side-by-side a number of national experiences. As Kogan puts it: "[J]uxtapositions bring together single country studies and, at minimum, allow a relatively rapid impression of the range of experiences to be secured" (Kogan 1996: 369). Rapid access to empirical data is, consequently, what seems to better characterise juxtaposition-type of comparative studies. Which leaves unanswered the issue of the understanding of cross-national differences and/or similarities. In effect, putting side-by-side national experiences does not make them have sense. A further dimension is needed to provide the researcher with

some wider framework within which locating the national pictures. As already mentioned, juxtapositions often lack the coherence of a true comparison. They very much resemble what Rose (1991: 451) refers to as studies dealing with "*multiple countries without concepts*", thus lacking the indispensable conceptual link(s) to obtain some kind of comparative elements among the different single-case analyses compiled. To a large extent, comparing countries in the way considered as juxtaposition come down to what can be referred to as "spontaneous comparisons". This is principally because concepts are apprehended and compared on the basis of their external similitude in terms of denomination or function. Eventually, in this particular type of studies the overall coherence, as van Vught and Goedegebuure remind (1994), rests with the editor who has to find out ways of linking together the different and disparate contributions.

In the terms presented above, the diachronic/synchronic approach provides tools to overcome the simple juxtaposition of national experiences. The combination of process and moment allows for a clear identification of the point of departure and, thus, the conditions from which national environments are moving on and the roads they respectively follow. In addition this approach is not based on a priori definition of notions such as "quality assurance" or "system differentiation" but on the meaning the different countries investigated have given them. This overcomes both the risk of imposing a notion that is inappropriate in a particular environment and to provide artificial coherence. To a large extent, the diachronic/synchronic approach allows for what Page names thematic comparisons.

They constitute the third type of Page's typology and, when constructed around a solid core of conceptual tools, allow common questions to be formulated for the study of different national environments. The crucial point in this type of comparative studies resides in the use of the data collected. This point is important inasmuch it directly influences the development of comparisons across the different units. Consequently, if the intention is to provide a coherent and pertinent structure, it is necessary to ask questions relevant in the different places under investigation and also to limit as much as possible the differences, the amount and relevance of the data collected. Such a task implies to go beyond immediate observation in order to find out the actual degree of difference and/or similarity across the national environments through a systematic back-and-forth between theoretical devices and empirical data. Thematic comparisons, thus, are based on an accurate use of a number of concepts and their actualisation in particular national settings. They differ from juxtaposition and spontaneous comparison inasmuch as the elements compared and the way they are handled with are not imposed but progressively constructed around a number of research questions that can be asked in different national environment. For instance, a thematic comparison of quality assurance (QA) would address how different countries respond to questions such as: *who* is charged with QA procedures; *how* are these procedures organised; *why* are they set up; etc. The diachronic/synchronic approach fits particularly well into this because it allows for sketching the situation existing at a moment of time and to reconstruct the different stages that have led to it. Moments are described and processes compared on the basis of common questions that will permit not only to highlight punctual differences/similarities but also to better understand them in within their respective context(s).

Pushed to an extreme, thematic comparisons, however, can lead to the formulation of causal relationships among variables, mainly by determining a number of regularities in the different patterns of the unit(s) under investigation. The development of such *causal comparisons* constitutes the fourth type of comparative studies mentioned by Page (1995: 134-137). This type of studies aims at providing a clear explanation of the phenomena under investigation by hypothesising a direct link between two factors. Causal comparisons therefore attempt to reproduce in the social sciences the model of natural experimentation. Mill's method of agreement and indirect method of difference (Mill 1843) constitute the prime reference of those searching for causal explanations. Goedegebuure and van Vught describe as follows what type of approach Mill's method implies for studies into higher education "*(...) a truly causal comparative study would have to begin with the specification of the hypothesis to be tested (...). The next step would be an overview of possible competing explanations, which would be followed by a clear specification of the cases and of the variables to be analysed in these cases. In causal comparative study the specification of both positive and negative cases is crucial. The theoretical framework would have to provide indications for such a specification; if no framework is available, a causal analysis cannot be performed*" (Goedegebuure and van Vught 1994: 19). The contribution by Goedegebuure and van Vught's constitutes with no doubt a major attempt to extend the use of experimental models in this particular field. In their collective work "Comparative Policy Studies", the Dutch scholars provide a number of theoretically founded causal analyses of different facets of higher education policy. From this perspective, the different contributions are constructed around specific hypotheses linking together, for instance, particular governmental regulations to curriculum innovation (Huisman and Jenniskens 1994) or power positions of key actors to forms of quality assessment procedures (Frederiks *et al.* 1994). Behind this attempt lies the concern of building a theory from the results obtained in the causal relationships empirically established. Kogan (1996) strongly questions the pertinence of such a method, mainly for its inadequacy to take into account the particularities that can be found in the countries compared. From this point of view, he directly challenges the pertinence of emulating the methods of the natural and sciences when it comes to formulate working hypotheses.

In effect, there is a major problem with Mill's methods when applied in the social sciences. And this problem is directly linked to what Mill himself reminded: his rules of inductive logic, from which the methods of agreement and differences are derived, are constructed for investigating experimental sciences and are not appropriate at all for social sciences. The prime reason for that is the great difficulty, not to say total impossibility, in the social sciences to conduct experiments. Consequently, the impossibility to manipulate the variables and, actually, to clearly identify control and experimental groups, makes it almost impossible to simply import the experimental model, thus leaving the proponents of causal comparisons with just an approximation. In effect, the most evident problem for social scientists in general and comparative researchers in particular is to isolate a factor (independent variable), or a small number of factors, that are associated with changes in another factor (dependent variable). This implies a deterministic approach to social reality where the relationship between the different variables is of the type: if A then B; if not A then not B. The problem here such direct conclusions can not arguably be reached principally for the lack of information one has access to. This point constitutes a central criticism

to causal comparisons in general and, in particular those developed in the field of higher education. In their attempt to postulate causal links between independent and dependent variables, this type of comparative studies actually reduce the scope of the investigation. Kogan (1996) strongly criticises this posture, especially the concerns for well-define and causal hypotheses. According to him, there is little point in restraining oneself in a too rigid framework. As he puts it: *"Whilst we can certainly look for juxtapositions and thematic comparison, and attempt to find causal explanation, we will be tying ourselves into an unnecessary bed of nail if we try to direct our research on the basis of pre-structured hypotheses"* (Kogan 1996: 398). He does not assume that no hypotheses are actually needed, which would be quite difficult to sustain, but stresses the heuristics value of what general research problems that, during the investigation, will be refined and refined again.

In the way presented above, the diachronic/synchronic approach and its practical use in cross-national comparisons largely follows Kogan's posture. For the reasons just mentioned it is not based on strict causal hypotheses but aims at constructing, in the different national environments taken into consideration, the processes through which a policy, in higher education as well as elsewhere, as come to be what it is. The focus, therefore, is not on the causal relations between variables but on the configuration of the process of policy formation in particular fields and the particular structuration of this process from one national environment to the other.

Provisional conclusions

This paper has hopefully permitted us to briefly sketch out some of the origins of higher education studies (Section 2) as well as some uses of the comparative method in this field (Section 4). For this latter purpose, a four level categorisation has been presented which, even if not the only typology existing to categorise comparative studies, provides a useful framework for discussing both the issue of the number of units used and the epistemological assumptions underlying any research. In this last section, I would like to come back to the approach presented in Section 3 and provide some examples of its potential practical uses.

As mentioned, the synchronic/diachronic approach is concerned with the elaboration of a coherent framework within which to locate the policies different countries have elaborated. The moment-related and process-related types of concepts allow for asking similar questions in different places and for establishing the rationale of the responses given in these different places. In the field of higher education, examples of such types of questions could include:

- in what way has the issue of quality assurance been addressed in different countries?

- what is the impact of massification on the shape and organisation of systems and institutions of higher education?
- what is the impact of information technologies on the universities? Do institutions of different countries react similarly to the Internet challenge?
- to what extent are different systems of higher education experiencing changes on their methods of funding (or management, for instance)? Is it possible to determine some common patterns in these changes? If yes what are the forces pushing towards this convergence? If not, what prevents the development of similar policies?

The type of comparison provided combines the cross-national examination of existing policies with the study of the particular processes that have made them emerge. This two-levelled framework permits us to analyse the general context within which national policies are set up, thus allowing room for pointing out some of the elements that make policies converge or diverge.

In this sense, this approach seems to correspond to what Kogan, following Page, has referred to as thematic comparisons. The selection of the theme itself can vary according to the researcher's interests and accessibility to the information needed. The method then implied combines two analytical levels, moment and process, thus addressing two different empirical realities: the existing policy and its history. The importance given to the notion of duration in the proposed method, through the diachronic/synchronic approaches, intends to go beyond the simple description of existing policies in order to get to their political roots. This should permit us to assess the relevance of the national variable when it comes to deal with issues most, if not all, national systems of higher education are being confronted with.

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