

## Chapter 22: Same same, but different? Comparing the politics of higher education policy in Western Europe, Canada, and the U.S.

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### Abstract

This concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of this volume on the politics of higher education policy. After presenting key results from each of the three contexts, we discuss the status-quo of the respective research communities including considerations of salient research themes and conceptual approaches in the study of higher education policy. To provide an overarching discussion of our findings, we map the insights gained in the previous chapters across the three contexts and the five main themes. Through this we also provide an answer to the conceptual question whether higher education policy dynamics are characterised by convergence or path-dependent divergence. We also highlight what researchers working on one of the three contexts can learn by looking at the other environments and conclude the chapter with an outlook on potential future challenges for higher education policymaking.

### Introduction

Universities around the world are often argued to be rather similar: they fulfil the same main tasks, namely teaching and research, they share a common organizational heritage, they become increasingly formally organized, and they are internationally connected in one way or the other (Frank & Meyer, 2020; Krücken & Meier, 2006; Ramirez & Meyer, 2013; Schofer & Meyer, 2005). This opens the question, in how far policies and state regulations directed towards higher education as well as the political processes surrounding them are also showing more similarities or whether we observe persisting national and regional differences. This interest was the starting point for this volume and our structured comparison of the politics of higher education policy in Western Europe, Canada and the US. By pursuing this interest, we hope that our empirical work offers two types of benefits: (a) to gain insights into policy process in this policy area, including its unique features, and (b) to identify areas of convergence or distinctiveness in policy innovation, in order to draw conclusions on the development of the policy area as well as processes of policymaking in general. Regarding the latter, the results of this volume can be expected to be relevant not only for policies regulating higher education and research, but also for adjacent policy field such as education policy in general or welfare state policies, and policy areas that are also characterised by strong and knowledge-intensive professions such as health.

Higher education is argued to have become more politically salient in recent decades. This is due to several processes: increasing levels of participation, increasing public and private

spending, the relevance of higher education as a transversal problem solver for other policy areas, and the shift towards knowledge economies (Chou, Jungblut, Ravinet, & Vukasovic, 2017; Christensen, Gornitzka, & Maassen, 2014; Gornitzka & Maassen, 2014; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011). This increased salience is suggested to have led politics to treat higher education policy less special (Gornitzka & Maassen, 2011). This refers to the idea that instead of being governed based on a balance between the state, the market and the academic profession (Clark, 1983), higher education is increasingly an object of political dynamics similar to other policy sectors. In the past, higher education policies were mainly an issue discussed between bureaucrats, representatives from the higher education sector, and few politicians who specialised on the issue. One could say that politicians in all three contexts, albeit at different points in time, have realised that higher education has become socially too important to be treated as a niche issue and so it is increasingly included in “ordinary” politics (Olsen, 2007). This also means that politics, but also the public, have increasing (and often contested) expectations towards higher education which go together with new ways of assuring that the sector performs as expected especially in the context of increased levels of public investments (Busemeyer, Garritzmann, & Neimanns, 2020; Maassen & Stensaker, 2011).

At the same time, the politics of higher education policy are influenced by general socio-political or politico-administrative trends that can be observed in several countries around the world including phenomena such as increased political polarization, the rise of populism and nationalism, or growing scepticism towards science (McCoy, Rahman, & Somer, 2018; Pierson & Schickler, 2020; Rutjens et al., 2022). With universities, researchers and their results becoming more important for solving different grand challenges, such as climate change, they also become more involved in the related political debates, which in turn can have collateral effects on higher education policy. These arguments highlight, that it is unlikely that we will see a move back to the more sector-specific policymaking regarding higher education, but rather that the increased salience of higher education policy represents a more lasting feature of the sector.

While these global trends have been observed in many different contexts, higher education policy also remains influenced by national as well as regional dynamics (Christensen et al., 2014; Dobbins & Knill, 2014; Slaughter & Taylor, 2016). Differences in politics, policy legacies, policymaking structures, political cultures, and higher education systems create a certain form of resilience to changes and resulting path-dependencies (Thelen, 1999). As reforms are usually benchmarked against existing arrangements, whether a change is seen as appropriate differs between contexts, opening the possibility for lasting differences even under conditions of converging policy trends.

These tensions between global trends and national path dependencies are also reflected in the conceptual foundation of this volume. We took our starting point in a neo-institutional understanding of political processes in the sense that both the role of actors and structures are acknowledged when considering factors that influence policymaking (Hall & Taylor, 1996). To get a better understanding of the tensions between the global and regional or national aspects of the politics of higher education policy, this volume presents a structured

comparison of the three contexts using the comparative elements within the chapters (i.e. comparing entities within a setting) and between the chapters (i.e. comparing across contexts) for each of the five sub-themes in higher education policy: funding, governance, interest groups, framing, and diffusion. In addition, we will present a structured comparison of the politics of higher education policy in each of the three contexts in this chapter. To capture the tension between convergence and divergence, we build on sociological and historical institutionalism to investigate the tension between the relevance of the wider social environment and historical processes.

Taken together these comparative elements enabled us to make sense of the different developments regarding the politics of higher education policy in Western Europe, the U.S. and Canada. The work presented in this volume offers a unique comparison of the politics of higher education policy which includes the most prominent higher education systems in the world, whose universities dominate international rankings and are often used as reference points also for policymaking in other regions of the world. Thus, we hope that our findings not only provide a bridge between these three regions and their so far somewhat siloed scholarly communities, but also offer relevant insights for those studying the politics of higher education policy in other contexts. Moreover, the different chapters in this volume can help us to understand the relation of different conceptual approaches used in the three scholarly communities. To this end, we will also use this concluding chapter to highlight areas in which the three scholarly communities can learn from one another both conceptually and regarding empirical comparisons.

This introduction is followed by three sections each presenting a structured comparison of policymaking dynamics in one of the regions. Afterwards, we will discuss conclusions arising from the comparison of the three contexts as well as theoretical implications of our work. We will conclude the chapter by discussing the potential effects of emerging challenges on the politics of higher education policy.

### [The politics of higher education policy in Western Europe](#)

As indicated already in the introduction to this volume, Western Europe is maybe the most diverse context covered in this book due to its mixture of a multi-country and supranational environment. Similarly, also European higher education is characterized by diverging and long-grown historical traditions (Huisman, Stensaker, & Kehm, 2009) that still influence policymaking today. At the same time, the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) created a context in which European higher education policy contains more unified strategies and is rather forward looking also because of the self-perception of European higher education as lagging behind especially the U.S. (see the chapter by Stensaker in this volume). Thus, the EHEA offers a framework in which higher education reforms can become a common project that unites the continent (Huisman et al., 2009). However, what this means for policymaking in a specific country or university still differs (Huisman & van Vught, 2009).

#### *Policy Systems*

Regarding the actors, contexts, and structures of policymaking, the chapters have shown that Western European higher education politics are still mainly affected by public actors. Contrary to North America, higher education in Western Europe is dominated by public higher education institutions. Moreover, Europe has a long history of provision of higher education through the state, which in itself makes private higher education less prominent compared to, for example, the US. This goes hand-in-hand with increased interest from political parties, bureaucrats and public regulatory agencies in higher education, as public institutions generally face more scrutiny and regulation (Jungblut & Vukasovic, 2018). Increased public spending and increased enrollment in higher education since the 1970s led to more political salience of the policy area (Chou et al., 2017), which further increased interest by public actors in the performance of the sector. In addition, recent studies on public opinion towards education policies in Europe show that public preferences regarding the provision of higher education differ both between countries and among people with differing political affiliations indicating that there is increased potential for political conflicts (Busemeyer et al., 2020). At the same time, the move towards New Public Management-inspired governance approaches and steering at a distance led to a development towards more corporatist approaches in higher education governance (Vukasovic, 2017, 2018). As a part of this development, the interest group landscape became more diverse in the last decades as other actors than the state and what Clark (1983) called the academic oligarchy are seen to have a legitimate interest in regulating higher education (Chou et al., 2017). The EHEA with its focus on the inclusion of organizations such as student unions or representatives of employer organizations helped to legitimize the involvement of these groups on the national level (Vukasovic, 2018). However, the impact of this varies as countries with more corporatist political cultures, generally speaking, do better in actively including interest groups in national level policy making (Schmitter, 2015). At the same time, intermediary organizations emerged on the national and to some extent the European level, which can act as buffers between universities on the one and public regulators on the other hand. This development coincided with agencification and the transfer of ministerial tasks to newly created public agencies (Friedrich, 2019; 2020).

The diversification of actors involved in higher education policy discussions also gave room for the rise of entirely new actors. Contrary to the U.S. context, private foundations do only play a limited role in Western Europe due to the dominant role of the state in many aspects of higher education policymaking. However, internationalization and differentiation led to the creation of an increasing amount of university alliances and networks (Vukasovic & Stensaker, 2018). These organizations are active in lobbying for the interest of their members and operate next to more inclusive stakeholder organizations.

The area in which European higher education politics saw maybe most development is the emergence of trans- and supranational actors as well as policy networks. Due to increasing Europeanization there is substantial policy-making activity on the European level and European actors are increasingly relevant for higher education policy (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014). At the same time, this activity does not provide strict regulations for national governments due to a lack of legal competences. Instead, these actors use steering through funding and other soft forms of influence to promote their policy ideas (Elken & Vukasovic, 2014). The multi-level dynamics in European higher education are maybe one of the most significant changes in the last 25 years that made policymaking and politics more complex. However, this did not lead to strict convergence of policies but rather added another layer on

top of existing polities with specific actors, forums, interests, and policymaking dynamics. These can also be used strategically by national actors, e.g. through up- or downloading of national level policies to collect additional legitimacy (Ravinet, 2008). Europeanisation created new issue networks in which national policy actors come together on specific topics in regular forums to discuss new trends and topics related to their area of expertise. Similarly, one can observe an increasing number of university alliances and joint study programs as well as large collaborative research networks that are funded by the EU. This leads to the growth of network structures across the region that are somewhat independent of national boundaries. These facilitate the flow of information, policy ideas as well as tools or solutions. Overall, this supports policy diffusion even without regulative competence as policy ideas can travel easily between countries through the existence of these supra-national networks.

### *Policy Dynamics*

Policy debates in Europe are diverse and the salience of specific issues within higher education policy varies between countries. However, there are some topics that by-and-large received increased attention in Western Europe in the last decades. First and foremost, Europeanisation and its associated reforms have been at the center of political attention especially in the first decade of the 2000s (Vukasovic, Jungblut, & Elken, 2017). After all, Europeanisation of higher education started already in the late 1980s with the EU's Erasmus program that had the aim to increase student mobility in Europe (Kehm, Huisman, & Stensaker, 2009). Therefore, mobility represents the core policy issue around which much of European collaboration has been build. Furthermore, both questions regarding access and affordability as well as questions of public governance of higher education, have remained high on the agenda (Bleiklie, Enders, & Lepori, 2017; Jungblut, 2016). With varying policy dynamics across different countries, issues regarding student support systems, tuition fees and widening access to higher education have constantly been debated (Garritzmann, 2016). At the same time, higher education in Western Europe is mainly funded through public funds, which makes the debate about the appropriate level of funding for higher education and demands for funding increases by higher education institutions another constant theme.

With regard to the public governance, studies have found that debates about the best way to steer the sector prevail along political conflict lines (Jungblut, 2016). However, a general trend towards more institutional autonomy, more output-oriented steering and more experimenting with different forms of internal governance arrangements can be observed (Bleiklie et al., 2017; Huisman & van Vught, 2009). All these changes must be seen though in the context of the generally dominant role of the state in governing higher education especially when comparing Europe to the US. Some of the proposals for changes in the governance have been framed in the context of a need to free the universities from state control to enable them to catch up with their US counterparts. However, in how far the link between the form of public governance and performance in research, innovation or international rankings can really be substantiated with empirical research is still unclear.

The salience of higher education policy in Western Europe also increased as higher education is seen as a transversal problem solver that is expected to address grand societal challenges such as climate change and deliver policy solutions to other policy areas (Chou et al., 2017). This goes hand in hand with the rhetoric describing higher education as an important building block of the knowledge economy (Chou & Gornitzka, 2014). This not only created links

between higher education policy and debates in other policy areas, but also made the set of political actors that are involved in policy debates more diverse. All of this cumulated in the latest EU strategy for universities that describes them as *lighthouses of the European way of life*, and explicitly highlights their role in addressing societal challenges as well as paving Europe's post-pandemic recovery (European Commission, 2022). At the same time, discussions about the relevance, or lack thereof, of core values in European higher education intensified in the last years, questioning in how far European integration in higher education has come at the cost of upholding norms such as academic freedom (Jungblut, Maassen, & Elken, 2020).

The dynamics of policy change also show national differences. While Europeanisation provides common reform ideas, what this means in national debates varies and research has shown that especially Western European countries seem to assign less importance to Europeanisation over time (Jungblut, Maassen, et al., 2020; Vukasovic et al., 2017). This indicates that following an initial decade of active reforming in the early 2000s national policymaking dynamics are becoming more important again. However, Europeanisation remains a constant narrative in policy debates. As highlighted in the chapter by Stensaker, the key narrative of European higher education policy is a forward-looking one. In Western Europe the initial assessment that the continent's higher education sector lags behind its North American, and to a certain extent Asian, competitors provides a frame which is inherently reform-oriented. At the same time, it must balance the acknowledgement of the long history and distinct national traditions that are enshrined in European higher education systems. This balancing act between embracing the imaginary of century old universities that serve vital functions for their national societies and international organizations that compete with other universities around the globe for innovations, talent and prestige is not only relevant for policymaking but also for universities themselves.

A common observation in the higher education research literature in Western Europe has been that even during the high-times of Europeanisation one could observe continuing national differences (Amaral, Neave, Musselin, & Maassen, 2009; Bleiklie et al., 2017). This mixture of dynamics of convergence and divergence can be explained using arguments from institutional theory. On the one hand, historical institutionalists would highlight that feedback effects of existing higher education systems will influence the room to maneuver for national policy reforms (Thelen, 1999). As, for example, Garritzmann (2016) shows for funding policies, implementing a reform that represents a radical change from the status quo is often politically costly making it less likely that governments will implement radical changes. Thus, national policy legacies are an important factor that helps to explain continued differences among European higher education systems even after more than two decades of intense Europeanisation. Similarly, Christensen et al. (2014) argue that ideas about higher education reforms that seem to be part of global reform debates, such as an increased focus on output-oriented steering, might provide national policy debates with converging labels and frames. However, the implementation of policy changes is influenced by what they call "national filters". These filters help actors to select policy ideas which are more in line with what is perceived as an appropriate policy, leading to nationally diverging responses to similar policy problems.

Western Europe, contrary to Canada and the US, is a set of very diverse autonomous countries each with their own policy legacy that underwent a process of Europeanisation in the last two decades. This diversity is still visible in many of the studies on higher education policy, even if the European countries are at times more similar to one another than they are to the US or

Canada. The differences in political or party systems, are greater, political culture, welfare state regimes etc. more varied, and all of this has an influence on the politics of higher education policy. Thus, the question whether Western European higher education systems can be described as converging or diverging depends on the analyzed time frame, the area within the policy field one looks at, and the units of analysis one compares. Western European higher education policy has become more alike since the start of the Bologna Process in 1999, but it is still far away from being a coherent area. Instead, the drop in salience of Europeanisation in the last years and the shift to Europeanisation through inter-university collaborations, visible for example in the European University Initiative, could lead to more convergence between universities while national policymaking remains somewhat divergent. This might further complicate the already complex multi-actor, multi-level, and multi-issue characteristics of higher education policy in Europe (Chou et al., 2017).

### *State of Scholarship*

Western Europe has an active research community studying higher education policy. However, this community is spread between those who can be described as higher education researchers, focusing nearly exclusively on this object of study, and those who work in different disciplines, such as political science, economics, or sociology, and for whom higher education is one study object among many. These two sub-groups interact at times, but due to their differing starting points in approaching the topic they can use slightly different conceptual lenses. In general, the field has made use of a diverse set of conceptual approaches from classical ideas from political science, such as party politics, over foundational sociological approaches, such as neo-institutionalism, to more recent conceptual works like multi-level governance. There is not one concept that is used most frequently, and one can argue that the diversity of conceptual approaches is a strength of the research community. Moreover, while the community has developed some original concepts, by-and-large those are rather limited in their conceptual reach and often more descriptive than predictive in their nature (Maassen, 2009). This has earlier been described as a problem, since studies on European higher education have often suffered from what has been called 'double-isolatedness', meaning studies have treated higher education as isolated from other policy sectors and rarely used analytical frameworks from general social sciences (Maassen, 2000, 2009). While links between disciplinary scholars and the higher education research community have gotten stronger as core disciplines have re-discovered higher education as a relevant object of study (Busemeyer & Trampusch, 2011), this has not changed fundamentally.

There are many aspects in which the Western European higher education policy community could profit from closer exchanges with their North American counterparts. First, the multi-level dynamics in higher education policy in the US and Canada, including exchanges between the federal and state / provincial level and exchanges among states or provinces, offer a good comparative framework that can help to better understand Europeanisation dynamics. Second, the differences in politics and polities between North America and Western Europe also hold the potential that cross-Atlantic comparisons provide us with a better understanding of higher education policymaking. For example, while Western Europe is strongly characterized by a corporatist interest group structure, the U.S. and to a certain degree Canada have a more pluralist environment. In this, very diverse types of actors are

involved in higher education policy debates, which can broaden the horizon regarding how we understand the interplay of interest groups in Europe. Similarly, funding dynamics in higher education are inherently different given the on average larger amount of private spending in the US and Anglophone Canada. These cases offer important contexts against which one can test results and assumptions developed in Western Europe, where the level of private spending is on average more limited. Finally, given that many European higher education reforms have been framed as a way to catch up with leading US institutions, increased collaboration between scholars from Western Europe and North America can help to assess in how far these institutions can really serve as best-practice examples, and in how far there are tradeoffs that are linked to mimicking their development.

### The politics of higher education policy in Canada

The politics of higher education policy in Canada is conditioned by national and provincial institutionalized cabinet governments (Dunn, 2002; Savoie, 1999), a highly decentralized federal structure (Elkins & Simeon, 1980; Smiley, 1987), distinct cultural and language differences between provinces, and provincial autonomy over higher education (Jones, 1997), a professional and politically neutral public service (Kernaghan, 2002), and the publicly funded character of higher education across the country (Fisher et al., 2006; Jones, 1996). Policy scholars have characterized Canada's national policy style as punctuated gradualism, in which the influence of executive federalism and other pressures shape gradual and periodic policy innovation and gradual reform over time, as a result of required close intergovernmental negotiation and cooperation (Howlett & Migone, 2018). This national policy style extends from the historical practices that forged the original confederation, which involved elite accommodation and negotiated settlement (Howlett & Migone, 2018).

### Policy System

Further to constitutional arrangements and policymaking style, there are a number of additional features of Canada's higher education policy system worth noting that help to shape Canada's higher education policy research environment. These include limitations to policy knowledge production, institutional arrangements for policy coordination, and policy actors. Policy-oriented research in higher education is generated across a wide variety of venues, including government, academic researchers, interest groups, networks, and private consultants. There are a limited number of higher education research centres in Canada, and within the multi-level and multi-departmental arrangements of government, there is relatively limited policy analytic capacity in higher education. Provincial governments have followed a pattern of creating and dissolving traditional intermediary organizations, largely replacing them with direct departmental decision-making or creating specific-purpose intermediary bodies, such as in the case of degree quality assurance or student mobility (Jones, 1996; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Smith, 2014). A few moderately institutionalized and voluntary coordinating bodies contribute horizontal self-coordination, intergovernmental cooperation, and information exchange (Jungblut & Rexe, 2017). Temporary policy venues



are relatively common catalysts for policy processes and take various forms, including ad hoc commissions or inquiries, special purpose advisory bodies, and *les Assises*, which often provide opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement. It has been observed that growth of expertise has expanded the range of actors associated with policy activities and communities, which could challenge governmental and intergovernmental monopolies (Howlett & Migone, 2018).

Canadian policy actors are active in both provincial and federal venues and are predominantly linked to publicly funded institutions. Interest groups representing faculty, students, and institutional networks interact with government in a variety of ways, shaped in part by differing regional politico-administrative arrangements and regional culture. The Canadian context has features of both pluralist and corporatist interest group systems; in recent decades, organized interests show increased fragmentation and differentiation, and exhibit competitive behaviours, in an environment with relatively few organized interests, and a demonstrated willingness and ability to cooperate on particular policy matters. Overall, faculty and students generally articulate their interests through nested, multi-level associated organizations, although there are distinctive features of the Québec student movement, relative to the rest of Canada (Drago, 2021). Institutional interests and advocacy networks are increasingly differentiated and specialized. At the national level, institutional membership organizations and networks have grown in number, with increasingly specialized identities, different membership alliances, and shifting policy priorities, operating within an increasingly competitive political environment. Similarly, restructuring of student organizations reflect shifting values and priorities in student politics, and competition between organizations for membership and influence. Less studied but present are philanthropic bodies, including those associated with universities (Thomarat, 2019) and influential foundations that have transnational interests in Canadian higher education (see e.g. Johnson et al., 2020).

One notable change in the environment is the emergence of new policy actors. There are increasingly influential entities in Canada who function at the interface of government, business, and higher education, who use their funding mechanisms to steer institutional behaviour. These formal academy-industry-government interfaces have increased in number and in influence, operating as quasi-intermediary bodies (Metcalf, 2010) and undertake policy-oriented advocacy and coordination. These new actors, their internal policymaking processes, and relationship to public policy processes are notable gaps in understanding in this field of inquiry and provide an opportunity for further research.

### Policy Attention

Overall, a dominant theme in historical and contemporary higher education policy debate centres on the proper role of the federal government, from the financing of post-war expansion to research funding models to questions of proper jurisdictional authorities and inter-governmental relations. Specific policy attention and activity has changed over time, and varies widely from advocates of high federal involvement, including many student and faculty organizations, and advocates of low federal involvement, such as the province of

Quebec. Overall, Canadian scholars tend to agree that the most significant policy effects are those shaped by the federal government; federalism can account for similar provincial responses on higher education policy areas. However, while provincial policy adoptions appear to suggest isomorphism, there are few empirical studies that confirm or describe mechanisms of horizontal policy transfer. Unlike the United States, there has been limited sub-national comparative work in this area, and even fewer exploring the role of political parties, partisanship, elected or administrative sector leadership in shaping policy adoption. The research undertaken to date affords a limited understanding of the role of path-dependencies or policy legacies in higher education politics and policymaking in Canada.

In the post-war era, dominant higher education policy debates in Canada have continuously focused on a few key areas. One primary theme is accessibility and affordability, centring on growth, system-building, and financing mechanisms. These debates are shaped by cycles of expansion in participation rates, institutional and system capacity building, and related increases to tuition fees, surfacing questions on the balance of cost-sharing between students and government, student debt, and need-based financial aid. Additional policy attention centres on economic benefits of higher education and how to address economic or social inequality through accessibility, including questions on socio-economic influences on participation and the role of education in economic growth. A key shift is evident with increasing questions on privatization and the role of marketization in higher education, which became well established in the 1990s, addressing the potential role of private universities and colleges, private sources of funding in higher education, research funding, and the regulation/deregulation of tuition fees. Finally, questions on various higher education reforms, such as increased reliance on market mechanisms, government and quasi-governmental steering, the effects of international and interprovincial trade agreements on higher education, and new forms of university governance and management.

More recently, there has been increased attention to the relationship between higher education, the labour market, and the economy, posing questions on public investment in research and innovation (Veletanlić & Sá, 2020) as well government steering of university science and university-industry partnerships (Veletanlić & Sá, 2019), employability and “skills gaps” (Viccko, Lorusso & McKechnie, 2019), and questions of quality assurance (Liu, 2020). Internationalization emerged as a policy priority, manifesting at the federal, provincial, and institutional levels, with complex interactions across policy spaces, presenting unique challenges to coordination (Tamtik, Trilokekar & Jones, 2020) and raising questions about how global convergence higher education is structured and organized (Klassen & Sá, 2020). Finally, shifting equity, diversity, and inclusion discourses and policy adoptions at the institutional level, addressing critical questions of systemic racism and the larger project of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada, have attracted recent scholarly attention (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Tamtik & Guenter, 2019).

#### State of Scholarship

Canada has a small research community studying higher education policy, comprised of both scholars and highly productive and influential practitioners. There are less than a handful of

university-based higher education or educational leadership research centres, associated exclusively with university faculties of education, and one provincially funded higher education research entity, located in Canada's most populous province, Ontario. Canadian higher education studies, as a field, is most closely affiliated with education scholars and practitioners and less so as an object of study within traditional social sciences, although Canadian scholars employ diverse conceptual approaches and disseminate research across variety of discipline-based venues.

Constitutional, legislative, and institutional factors in shaping policy choices and outcomes is firmly established as a dominant framing and explanatory narrative in both French and English empirical policy scholarship. However, there has been limited formal attention to causal complexity. Critical scholarship has focussed on questions of power, examining policy actor behaviour and assessing policy implications or outcomes with a social justice lens. Regardless of scholarly approach, higher education policy studies lag other Canadian policy research (which also tends to focus on federal policy subjects), in both topical attention and conceptualization, and its limitations share similar characteristics with those observed in other regions in this volume (Maassen, 2009).

There are a number of opportunities for Canadian policy communities to benefit from greater interaction with international scholarship. Drawing from approaches to studying political processes in the United States and Western Europe, the established Canadian state-centered theoretical lens could be extended to further and more precisely understand dynamics of policy innovation and reform, and the political behaviour of policy actors and interest articulation. Canada's diverse regional policymaking contexts and cultures offer an opportunity to contribute interesting cases to comparative projects. One priority area could be to gain greater insights from both the United States and Western Europe into the dynamics of policymaking, with increased marketization and fundamental shifts in funding across most Canadian provinces and given a potential widening gap in political priorities related to higher education finance. Further, European scholars have developed promising approaches to examining the political dynamics in key policy areas that are largely unexamined in the Canadian context but are important areas of policy innovation, such as quality assurance and student mobility. Finally, larger questions of the political expressions of global competition and improved conceptualization of Canadian government regulation and policy design in higher education could be advanced through international scholarly exchange.

Last, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the unwelcome opportunity for observing the politics of higher education policy, across all areas covered in this volume: government and intergovernmental relations, university governance and decision making, access and affordability, policy entrepreneurship. Reflections on this work is emerging in Canadian higher education policy studies (Buckner, Zhang & Blanco, 2021; El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020) and policy sciences (Migone, 2020). It will be an interesting comparative international opportunity to assess if the fundamental dynamics of multi-actor, multi-level governance in higher education has changed in response to this policymaking environment, or whether and to what extent political behaviours in this arena conformed to established patterns.

## The politics of higher education policy in the U.S.

The politics of higher education policy in the United States is shaped primarily by the federalist government structure and the more pluralist nature of many stakeholders seeking influence. Although the 10<sup>th</sup> amendment of the U.S. Constitution reserves power over education to the states, the federal government exerts tremendous influence over the higher education sector through funding and agenda-setting. Similar to the Canadian and Western Europe contexts, the U.S. region has wide variation in higher education at the sub-national level. U.S. states govern higher education with different levels of centralization (McGuinness, 2016), fund higher education using different approaches (Hearn, 2014), award financial aid based on different criteria of need and merit (College Board, 2021), and attend to equity differently (Jones & Berger, 2019). Indeed, within the federalist system states are often seen as laboratories to experiment with different approaches to government and policy that often lead to different outcomes.

### Policy System

The higher education policy system in the United States leans more pluralistic than the policy systems in Canada and Western Europe. Public and non-public actors shape the policy activity at both federal- and state-levels. The federal higher education system primarily includes government agencies that distribute and manage resources for student financial aid and research. There are also several national member associations that represent different types of higher education institutions (e.g., research universities, private universities, and community colleges). At the state-level, the public actors with the most authority and influence are the state higher education agencies that coordinate and govern public higher education institutions within each state. States take a range of approaches in the autonomy of colleges and universities and their accountability to the state. Most recently, there's been a rise in accountability efforts within state systems of higher education which has included the increasing influence of the state governor (Tandberg et al., 2018).

The United States also has a robust collection of non-public actors that influence higher education. This includes constituent organizations that represent students, faculty, academic disciplines, and key professional functions (e.g., financial aid, admissions, business officers). Arguably, however, the actors with the most sharply rising influence are policy organizations, or intermediaries. These intermediaries range from regional compacts that provide policy analysis and services to states in defined geographic regions to single-issue policy organizations related to college affordability, diversity equity and inclusion, and public accountability and efficiency. Intermediary organizations exert influence on higher education through mechanisms such as providing technical information, creating and expanding networks, and advancing specific policy solutions (Ness et al., 2018).

One of the main differences between the United States and the Canadian and Western European contexts is the scope of private funding for higher education. This includes not only tuition and fees that students pay to attend public and private institutions, but also significant funding from private entities including corporations and philanthropic foundations. In fact, many argue that foundations are playing major roles in identifying and advancing the policy priorities at the national and state level (Hadid, 2021; Miller & Morphew, 2018). This rising

influence of non-public actors most often supports the objectives and policy directions of federal and state governments. Yet, some critics contend that foundation funding has shifted the genesis of higher education policy priorities from public to market influences (Barhardt, 2017).

### *Policy Dynamics*

Given the wide variation in policy systems and actors, there are many areas of higher education policy attention in the U.S. At the risk of over-simplifying, however, these areas of attention tend to converge around three main strands. The first strand is the most stable and productive in examining the effects of higher education policies on various outcomes. The strand includes a robust literature examining the effects of higher education funding, governance, and policies on outcomes at the student-, campus-, state-, or federal-level. For example, over the recent decades, scholars examined the effectiveness of performance-based funding models on student retention and graduation outcomes (Tandberg, Hillman, & Fryar, 2015), the effect of student financial aid approach to whether and where students attend college (Flores, 2010; Zhang & Ness, 2010), and how state transfer and articulation agreements influence degree attainment (Spencer, 2021). These approach draws heavily on economic models often grounded in human capital theory.

The second strand includes examinations of how various contexts of the policymaking setting influence the adoption of higher education policy decisions. This body of work has grown in the last several decades and has relied on theories of the public policy making process such as diffusion, advocacy coalition, policy entrepreneurs, and principal agent theory. These theories point to several contexts such as socioeconomic and demographic factors (e.g., race/ethnicity, income), political factors (e.g., party control, formal government power, interest group activity), and external factors (e.g., intermediary organization activity) that stand to influence whether state governments adopt certain policy initiatives (Hearn, et al., 2017; McLendon, 2003). This work has been expanded to examine a wide range of policy decisions including student financial aid programs, performance-based funding models, and governance structures (Doyle, 2006; McLendon, Deaton, & Hearn, 2007, Morgan et al., 2021). One particularly salient finding has been the influence of political party control on the adoption of different types of policies. Based on the increasingly partisan divide on the perceived value of higher education with Republicans showing fall less support for higher education than Democrats (Parker, 2019), this line of inquiry stands to grow among researchers and higher education leaders.

The final strand of the notable policy dynamics relates to higher education affordability, access, and equity. This work has generated a significant amount of scholarly attention for several decades and has become even more pronounced in recent years. This line of inquiry focuses on the differences in funding and outcomes for students, faculty, and other stakeholders from communities underrepresented in higher education. In the United States this is primarily includes individuals from lower income backgrounds, racially minoritized communities (namely African-American, Latinx, and Indigenous populations). This work has long examined access and opportunity to higher education for students from these underrepresented communities. In the last decade, there has been much more attention on

college success or degree attainment and the extent to which attainment gaps exist for under-represented populations (Jones & Berger, 2019). Much of this work is conceptually grounded in social and cultural capital and in critical perspectives, such as critical race theory. These theories highlight the power imbalance felt by communities of color in the United States. They also challenge the pluralist notion that many groups can influence policy decisions likely sharing Shattschneider's (1965) critique that "the flaw of pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent." This line of inquiry seems likely to strengthen, especially as race-conscious higher education policies continue to be advanced and opposed in many U.S. states.

### State of Scholarship

Compared to the Canadian and Western European contexts, the United States includes a robust landscape of researchers, academic programs, and policy organizations that examine higher education policy. The Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), which serves as the disciplinary and professional association for U.S. higher education researchers, has roughly 1500 members from more than 100 academic programs in U.S. colleges and universities. There are dozens of academic journals that publish peer reviewed research on a range of topics related to higher education. Even if the sub-field of scholarly emphasis on policy and politics represents a share of this overall activity, higher education is indeed a growing field of study in the U.S.

In addition to these academic entities, many higher education researchers from state agencies or other policy organizations contribute to the higher education scholarship in the U.S. All 50 states have at least one state agency that coordinates or governs higher education institutions and nearly all of these agencies include research and policy analysis officials. The State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) Association serves as a member organization for these agencies and provides substantial resources and leadership that inform state level decisions and advocate for state higher education agencies and represent the state agencies in national and federal deliberations. There are dozens of other higher education associations and organizations, in addition to SHEEO, that publish policy reports and convene actors to examine pressing policy issues.

U.S. higher education researchers have much to learn from Canadian and Western European scholars. For example, the research attention in Western Europe to policy networks across the broader EHEA region offers important insights on how autonomous countries with their own policy legacies find connections and opportunities for policy transfer. The U.S. states, often clustered by region, also have distinct policy legacies. With the increasing partisan influence on higher education, these divisions may sharpen. For these reasons, the studies of networks and policy harmonization in Western European may be increasingly relevant in the U.S. context. From the Canadian higher education studies, U.S. researchers could learn from their attention to social and economic inequality. This line of inquiry is clearly ascendant in the U.S. and examinations of systemic racism and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples in Canada would clearly be relevant. Scholarly exchange on the sources of these inequalities, the structures that perpetuate them, and the policies to eviscerate them would provide U.S. researchers insights from Canada's distinct history and approach. Finally, there are several specific areas of policy attention in common for U.S., Canadian, and Western European

scholars. The balance of institutional autonomy and public accountability, the share of public and private costs for higher education, and the influence of broader social, economic, and political factors—just to name a few—are central to our higher education research communities. By understanding how these tensions exist and operate in other policy settings, higher education researchers may see our own contexts, tension, and policies more clearly.

### Comparing political dynamics in higher education policy in North America and Western Europe

One of the aims of this volume is to use a comparative approach to investigate in how far there is rationalization and convergence (Bromley & Meyer, 2015; Ramirez & Meyer, 2013) of the politics of higher education policy in the three contexts or whether we observe path dependence and lasting divergence (Thelen, 1999). While the comparative chapters in each section of the book and the previous sections of this chapter provide comparisons within regions and regarding each of the five aspects of policymaking, in the following we will take more of a birds-eye view and compare policymaking in higher education policy in all three contexts across all five aspects. To this end, we will focus on the key policy issues, the role of the federal / supranational level of governance and the five aspects of policymaking that provided the core structure for this volume. By comparing the three contexts we will also be able to identify in how far there is convergence and rationalization at play or whether regional filters and path dependence persist (Christensen et al., 2014; Thelen, 1999). Finally, we will also discuss the state of scholarship in the three higher education policy research communities. Table 1 provides an overview of the comparison between the three contexts.

**Table 1. Comparison and summary of main findings**

	Western Europe	United States	Canada	Do we see convergence or divergence between contexts?
Central policy issues	Europeanisation and student / staff mobility persist as relevant issues, but salience of issues is strongly driven by national differences	Affordability, access, success in higher education, especially difference by economic/social/demographic characteristics	Relationship between higher education, the labour market, immigration, and the economy; research and innovation; economic and social inequality	High degree of divergence between contexts; issue salience driven by local agendas and perceived performance of higher education
	Limited supra-national role, mainly	Limited supra-national	Limited federal role, but financial	Limited role of the supranational / federal level in all

Supra-national/federal role	standardising & steering with money, focus on institutional level because partly decreasing national interest	Financial aid/research federal funding Increasing state government control/influence of higher education	steering in focussed policy areas; influence contested by sub-national governments, but encouraged by institutional actors and networks	contexts, path-dependence from the legal/constitutional order, common trend to use steering though the provision of funding to exert influence
Governance	Historically strong role of the state developed into more diverse governance arrangements with focus on interest representation and university autonomy;	Rise in state-level accountability efforts; increasing influence of state governors and of party politics	Incremental reform tied directly or indirectly to government funding, with strong historical university autonomy	Differing historical starting points and diverging reform dynamics; relevance of university autonomy as common theme, but policymaking and reform dynamics strongly influenced by political context
Finance	Comparatively high level of public funding using diverse funding approaches (performance-based vs block grants), funding dynamics often the result of political processes interacting with policy legacies	Shrinking share of public funding (state appropriations) compared to tuition/fees; Rise in state-level performance-based funding models	Historically high public funding, with subnational variation; changing dynamics related to increased government steering and reliance on market mechanisms	Still high levels of public funding in Western Europe and Canada paired with a move to more performance-based allocation; in the U.S. stronger reliance on tuition fees but also use of performance-based allocation for shrinking public funds
Policy framing	Diverse set of frames is being used reaching from welfare	Dominance of neoliberal ideology embraced by	Shifting emphasis over time on themes of	Framing of higher education policy differs between contexts with



	state, Europeanisation, economic growth to solving societal challenges	policy actors has led to policy solutions that embed neoliberal governing rationality and market-based solutions	education rights, economic development and change, social and economic equality	Western Europe and Canada having a wider variety of frames being used;
Interest organizations	Mainly corporatist with multi-level dynamics, increasing diversity over time; growing importance of university networks & alliances	Both statist and corporatist traditions with growing influence of philanthropic foundations that support intermediary & advocacy organizations	Both statist and corporatist traditions, with significant sub-national differences; increasing diversity over time; new government-business-academia partnership bodies	Differing dynamics in the three contexts and different types of actors are gaining more importance; but converging development that interest group ecology is getting more diverse in all contexts as new actors enter the arena
Policy diffusion	Vertical dynamics through Europeanisation but increasingly also horizontal through organizational networks & university alliances	Significant horizontal diffusion Some vertical diffusion; Increasing partisan divide in support for higher education sector as limiting factor	Evidence of a national system of emulation and sub-national isomorphism; limited understanding of dynamics of conditioning vertical diffusion and voluntary horizontal diffusion	Diffusion is present and relevant in all contexts, but concrete dynamics differ; diverging balance between vertical and horizontal diffusion linked also to role of supranational / federal level

Looking at the central policy issues, one can observe a high degree of diversity between the contexts. Already within Western Europe it is hard to identify a specific set of dominant policy

issues and when comparing the three contexts this diversity is even more pronounced. The one commonality that one can see is that higher education's relevance for other policy areas has increased in all contexts. This is visible, for example, in the fact that issues such as the role of higher education for economic development or reducing social inequality are key themes across the contexts. However, while universities in all three contexts fulfil the same functions, which of their function is highlighted in policy discussions or perceived as needing reform differs. We know from studies of policy agendas (Baumgartner, Green-Pedersen, & Jones, 2006) that attention of policymakers is a rare good. Thus, issue attention is often driven by perceived lack of performance or opportunity for reform. These dynamics are usually strongly embedded in a specific political system giving room for increased importance of national peculiarities. The politicisation of higher education and the growing linkages to other policy areas (Chou et al., 2017) further increase the relevance of national or state / province policymaking as well as politico-administrative arrangements (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2018) creating limitations for rationalization and convergence and fostering persistent differences. The role of the supranational and federal level in the three contexts is overall rather limited. As outlined in the introduction to this volume, we are aware that the comparison between a supranational entity like the EU and a federal state does not happen on equal footing, but it is interesting to see that we can observe similar dynamics across contexts. Neither the EU nor the federal level in Canada or the US have a strong role in higher education policy and all these entities operate under very strict legal limitations on their ability to be active in policymaking in this area. These limitations are less the results of recent governance reforms but rather represent examples of path-dependence stemming from early constitutional arrangements that continue to limit their active involvement. Because of these limitations it is also not surprising that the main tool that the supranational / federal level actors use to influence higher education policy is in all contexts the provision of funding for certain activities. This includes research, student support or international mobility. In addition, policy coordination or standardisation is used to some extent to support the harmonisation of higher education policies of the different countries, states, or provinces. In how far these activities of the supranational or federal level are seen as appropriate is to a differing degree an object of political debate in the three contexts. Thus, a commonality across contexts seems to be that steering through the provision of funding for activities that are perceived as desirable remains to be the most promising and least controversial way to exert influence on higher education.

Looking at the five aspects of policymaking that we focused on in this volume and the question of the level of convergence across the three regions one can observe some interesting dynamics (see table 1). First, the results clearly show that there is persistent divergence across contexts as policymaking dynamics continue to be influenced by politico-administrative contexts and local policy agendas. Interestingly, it seems that in some areas Western Europe and the U.S. are at the end of the continuum of differences while Canada takes up a middle position between the two blending aspects of both contexts. At the same time, one can also identify similar change dynamics across the three contexts. All three policymaking environments are characterised by a greater number of actors with more diverse backgrounds being involved in and relevant for higher education policymaking. Moreover, higher education policy is becoming more politicised in all three contexts and increasingly linked to other policy areas creating a multi-level, multi-actor and multi-issue policymaking environment (Chou et al., 2017). Finally, higher education in all three contexts is exposed to a growing political demand that public funding is closely tied to demonstrating performance.

Taken together, our results are very much in line with the proposal by Christensen et al. (2014) who suggested that while there are global reform trends in higher education that these undergo processes of national or regional filtering before being adopted in a given context. This follows arguments from historical institutionalism (see e.g. Thelen, 1999) that highlight the relevance of policy legacies and path dependence of policymaking dynamics for the way in which globally circulating reform ideas are being adopted. The results from our volume clearly demonstrate the relevance of these arguments for higher education policy. So, while there are common reform themes across contexts, to understand what this will mean in a given context still demands investigating the interaction between a concrete politico-administrative system and the reform idea (Bleiklie & Michelsen, 2013, 2018). This demands more comparative studies on the politics of higher education policy not only between the three contexts addressed in this volume but also between other regions of the world.

As explained in the sections above, the scholarship on the politics of higher education policy in the different contexts rests on differing levels of institutionalisation. While in the U.S. there is a sizable higher education research community, the Canadian community is much smaller and often embedded in disciplinary departments. In Western Europe there are some distinct higher education research centres, but many researchers are also here embedded in disciplinary departments. The difference in organizational structure of research communities also shows in the way how conceptual lenses are borrowed from different disciplines. As visible in Table 2, different conceptual approaches are prominent in the three contexts. At the same time, all have in common that there is only very limited development of own conceptual approaches. This echoes Maassen's (2000) argument that higher education research is in need of constant exchanges with core disciplines to ensure that studies remain up to date regarding the latest conceptual development. This is even more relevant for studies of the politics of higher education policy as the object of study is not only higher education but rather the politics surrounding the sector. Thus, strong links to conceptual development in fields such as political science, public administration or policy studies are especially important. Moreover, the comparison in table 2 shows that policymaking environment shapes the key issues that are being studied. Finally, both emerging and established topics in higher education research reflect differences in issue attention in policymaking. As studies of higher education policy often focus on aspects that are part of ongoing political debate or recent policy changes, there is a feedback loop between policy issues that are especially contentious or object of ongoing reforms and the type of research that is being done.

**Table 2. The state of scholarship on higher education policy in North America and Western Europe**

	Western Europe	United States	Canada
Established focus	Europeanisation, HE governance / autonomy of universities, the social dimension of HE	Affordability/access, policy adoption, transfer across states	Policy histories, affordability & access to HE, the federal role in HE
Emerging interest	Higher education's role in sustainability	Focus on equality, diversity & inclusion	Questions of social justice (EDI),

	/ climate change, the role of values (e.g. academic freedom) in Europeanization	(EDI), special importance of issues related to racial justice	internationalization, the role of policy actors, innovation policy
Established theoretical frames	Party politics, multi-level governance / Europeanisation, organizational research / institutional theory, theories of the policy process, critical sociology	Human capital theory, rational choice, institutional theory, theories of the policy process	Critical sociology, legal/institutional history, institutional theory, human capital theory, rational choice
Emerging theoretical frames	Interest group perspectives, meta-organizations	Critical perspectives, strategic action fields	Theories of the policy process

Besides those differences, the three contexts also show some commonalities. Policymaking in higher education in all three contexts is characterised by multi-issue, multi-level and multi-actor dynamics (Chou et al., 2017), and this is also reflected in the scholarship on higher education policy. For example, questions of actor constellations, interplay between levels of governance or diffusion of ideas are of interest in all three contexts. In addition, vertical policy diffusion between countries, states or provinces is a relevant topic of research in all contexts. This highlights the nature of all three contexts as rather complex interacting systems with elements that observe and learn from each other. One reason for this mutual learning is also that higher education is becoming a more salient policy area in all three contexts which is accompanied by an increasing number of linkages to other policy areas. This makes higher education policy become more politicised, which in turn sets incentives for higher education institutions and their networks to become more active players in political debates. The role of higher education for social equality clearly stands out as a central issue for researchers in all three scholarly communities. However, also here the specific focus of policy research is shaped by salient policy debates. While in North America questions of racial justice and the inclusion of the indigenous population are of increasing relevance, the focus in Europe is stronger rooted in classical sociological questions of class or socio-economic background with only limited attention to specific groups, e.g. access to higher education for refugees (Jungblut, Vukasovic, & Steinhardt, 2020).

Overall, the comparisons highlight that even if the research communities in the three contexts are to a certain extent siloed and links between them are still somewhat limited, there are many commonalities in the way how higher education policy is studied. This makes an expansion of comparative studies both easy and potentially fruitful. Studying the politics of higher education policy across diverse contexts not only helps to highlight similarities and differences but also allows scholars to better understand peculiarities of their own context and question taken-for-granted aspects of both their research and policymaking itself (Kosmützky & Nokkala, 2014).

Last, and this is one of the things we started to figure out during writing this book, there are new social realities and emerging themes that are influencing the politics of universities around the world and that have the potential to be even more important in the future. We focused on five key aspects - diffusion, framing, funding, governance, and interest groups – when trying to understand how the politics of higher education policy are shaped in North America and Western Europe. However, our regional focus should by no means be understood in a way that these key aspects and the dynamics that have been described regarding them are only relevant for the three contexts we chose to study. To the contrary, we strongly believe that the five key aspects are all lenses that would be useful to understand and compare the dynamics of politics regarding universities in other regions of the world. First, they represent fundamental aspects of policymaking for higher education and thus are easily transferable to other environments. Second, the multi-level, multi-issue, and multi-actor dynamics that we highlight have already been described as relevant characteristics also for higher education policy in other regions (Chou et al., 2017). Finally, universities in North America and Western Europe are often perceived as prestigious role-models which other countries aspire to emulate to a certain extent. Thus, policymaking dynamics from the three contexts we studied can be expected to inform policy debates in other environments.

Besides the relevance for other contexts, studying higher education policy in the three contexts also highlighted the growing relevance of connections to other policy areas and the influence of more general reform processes on higher education. For sure, one of the top priorities would be artificial intelligence (AI) and its influence on university development. Several countries are engaged in the development of AI, which promises an economic impact between 7.1 and 13.1 trillion US dollars (Manyika et al., 2013) but also significant breakthroughs in education (Daniel, 2019). Already, research in pedagogy analyzes methods, practices and software using AI that aim to improve student success by focusing on various aspects of learning: targeted support for carrying out educational exercises, prediction of success to adapt teaching, the kind and nature of student feedback, etc. In fact, when one looks at how AI finds its way into universities, one can observe that projects are often driven by available government funds and are not explicitly linked to policies regarding AI in higher education. This lack of a regulatory framework makes this policy issue especially interesting for future studies as an increasing number of countries and universities will explore how they can use this technology in their provision of higher education.

The Covid-19 pandemic also had and is having immense effects on the delivery of education as well as research activities in university around the world (Goedegebuure & Meek, 2021). For the better or the worst, Covid-19 was a very strong catalyst for distance education and remote work in universities. The pandemic has provided the unwelcome opportunity for observing the politics of higher education policy play out in real time and partly at record speeds across all areas covered in this volume. It will be highly relevant and informative in the next years to embark on comparative international research to assess if the fundamental dynamics of multi-actor, multi-level governance in higher education changed in response to

the pandemic, or whether and to what extent political dynamics conformed to established patterns. The fact that this reality lasted more than two years (while we are writing these lines) most likely will have significant influence for the future of higher education. But it is important to remember that decisions regarding delivery of courses, teaching practices or research organization were not driven by universities themselves, but by political decisions in a context of a global health crisis.

Unfortunately, the role of crises seems to be an important and continuing game changer for the future of higher education and its politics. As universities are increasingly perceived as tools to solve society's grand challenges, policy problems like global warming will be an important trend for research and educational provision. This will influence university organization, the delivery of courses, and government-funded research activities. Policy aims such as becoming carbon-neutral, require not only technical innovations but also better understanding the public psychology behind a move towards a green future, or finding solutions for the political challenges linked to the implementation of green policies. This will be of central importance for higher education and its policies in the coming decade.

The issue of global warming also raises the question of immigration and integration, especially in the context of humanitarian crises and how universities respond to them and act as responsible organizations in an interconnected world. Universities as educational institutions that provide skills and knowledge, but also help people to become part of a society play a key role in the education sector's response to the integration of immigrants in general and refugees in particular (see e.g. Jungblut, Vukasovic, et al., 2020). World events like the influx of refugees in Western Europe in 2015 or the humanitarian consequences of the Russian attack on Ukraine in 2022 alternate the political environment for universities who often play a part in national responses to these challenges. Facing these kinds of situations, universities will have to react, and governments will expect from universities that they do their part in helping people integrate into society. At the same time, global conflicts and power struggles between countries or world regions also put internationalization of higher education on trial. With increasing global tensions collaboration across borders can become more challenging for academics and universities and we need to understand how internationalization evolves in different regions of the world given increasing competition between nations.

One aspect that is linked to the increase in tensions is the question of the role of foundational, democratic values in higher education. This debate is maybe the most visible with regard to the role of academic freedom and the question in how far cooperation in higher education is based on common foundational values (Jungblut, Maassen, et al., 2020). Similar debates also take place among students and staff in universities. With certain social values becoming more politicized and divisive, conflicts between, for example, the ideal of free speech and ideas of safe spaces for marginalized groups can create tensions. Some regions covered in this volume, have already considered new legislation to regulate academic freedom in the context of these value conflicts (Cloutier et al., 2021).

Overall, universities have always been answering to social needs and political expectations from their immediate environment. They are foundational institutions of the modern state and have fulfilled and keep fulfilling key functions for the state (Clark, 1983). The key

difference today is that universities are embedded in a much more complex environment of globalised knowledge societies that rely on universities as central knowledge institutions to help them solve fundamental social challenges. Thus, by becoming more important for societies, universities are also getting increasingly connected to a wide range of policy fields, while being increasingly influenced by global events demanding from universities and policymakers to be much more responsive and adaptive to changing conditions. We do not know what the challenges of the coming decades will be for higher education, but by investigating the processes through which higher education is regulated and the policies that steer it, we will be able to have a better understanding of the interplay between politics and higher education and how universities can contribute in a meaningful way to solving societies' grand challenges.

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