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Higher education, the global governors, and epistemic governance

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Ключевые слова:
Epistemic governance; higher education; reform; neoliberalism; sociological institutionalism

Аннотация:
Using a neo-institutionalist framework of epistemic governance, this paper reviews how individual universities and national systems of higher education globally are being reformed according to a global script. A number of global governors, such as intergovernmental organisations and INGOs, are involved in making and circulating these scripts. However, this perspective highlights that such governance is well-hidden. Most university managers or national policy-makers are not even aware of global governance that functions by working on how we perceive the world and what reforms are desirable. Driven by realist assumptions of the social world (as common in International Relations theories), analysts and activists tend to look at these global governors as power centres that dictate policy measures. Yet, the same analysts stumble against the obvious problem that these 'governors' are not governing in the traditional sense of the term. Rather, those reforming their own universities think according to the same global scripts, and generally believe it is a perfectly reasonable and locally appropriate way of reforming. This is one reason why the similar reforms keep taking place around the world despite considerable criticism. The framework of epistemic governance draws attention to systemic, worldwide patterns underlying the hidden politics of national higher education policies, such as massification and utilitarianism as analysed here.

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One of the conceptual founders of the modern university, Immanuel Kant, saw the university as comprising three faculties in constant and productive tension: 'pure' sciences (including natural and social sciences), 'applied' sciences (such as law and politics), and the 'arts' (including humanities such as philosophy, literature, and the fine arts) [14]. Kant's vision was that the tension amongst these faculties would produce new creations that would mark the university as a site of civilizational Culture (Bildung). But much has changed since the 18th century. Recent developments in modern universities have led in the opposite direction to Kant's vision. Universities are now more aptly described as centres of 'excellence', concentrating on form, instead of culture that concentrates on content [30], [34]. These developments are not restricted to just some 'leading' universities, say in North America or UK, but are intensely evident across northern Europe and increasingly around the world [8]. 21st century universities tend to prioritize quantifiable numbers of research publications and graduates rather than what those publications say or how those graduate behave, tend to focus on international rankings and global curricula rather than national relevance and local curricula, and tend to raise high academic walls separating sub-sub-disciplines while at the same time merging administrative units together.

Of course, many cultural and philosophical trends of late modernity also affect the university, and some of the above features have been identified as belonging to broader cultural trends [9], [10], [14]. Yet, we still need much greater understanding about how these diffuse philosophical trends translate into specific university reforms. Where is the modern university headed, and why? Why are universities looking so similar across northern Europe and elsewhere, and why are similar reforms enacted even though the material and cultural conditions in each case are so very different?

This paper seeks to address these broad questions by proposing a sociological perspective to locate and make sense of these trends. The analytical aim is to outline a theoretical framework that can guide future empirical examinations into particular universities. This framework builds on the perspective of sociological neo-institutionalism [22], [33]. Most research into higher education tends to focus on its minute managerial aspects, relying on evidence from particular, time- or space-bound environments. As a result, some of the larger trends and questions such as those above often remain unaddressed. By contrast, this paper sacrifices empirical depth in favour of theoretical breadth. As a comparative social theory argument, the paper thus relies less on precise statistics from one or even a few institutions. Rather, the empirical support is derived from secondary comparative data culled from the author's own research over the past years into higher education reform, as well as eventually be matched by empirical investigation into specific cases.

Trends in current university reforms

Massification

One of the most outstanding features of higher education is that there is much more of it across the world than ever before. Enrolment in higher educational institutions (HEIs) has grown exponentially across the world in the last century (Figure 1).

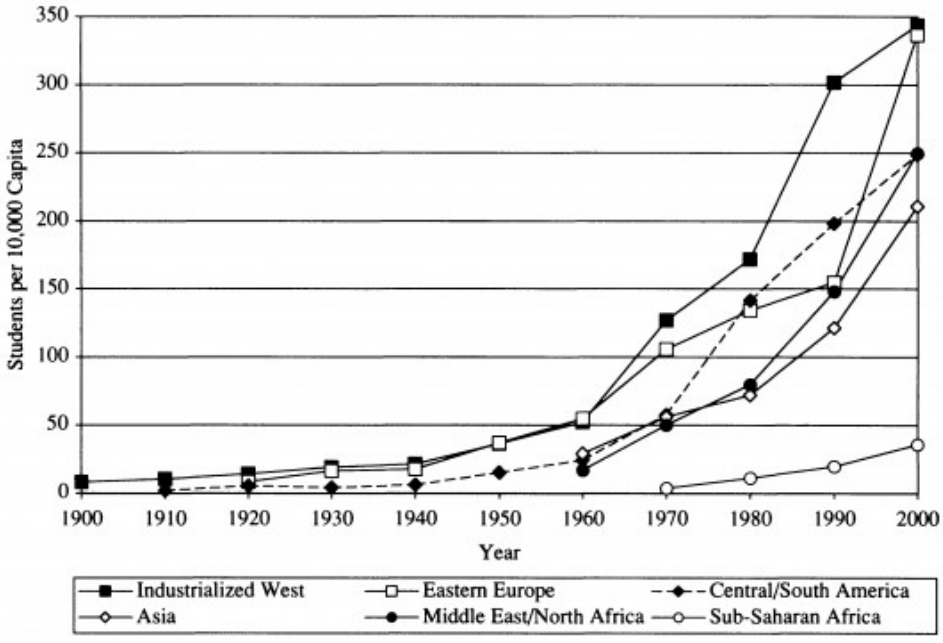

Figure 3. Tertiary Students per Capita, Regional Averages, 1900–2000 (constant cases).

Note: Industrialized West (n = 15), Eastern Europe (n = 11), Central/South America (n = 19), Asia (n = 18), Middle East/North Africa (n = 13), sub-Saharan Africa (n = 38).

Figure 1 – Growth in tertiary enrolments worldwide [34; 908]

The sharpest rise since 1980 has been outside of the industrialized countries, with Eastern European nations now competing with OECD members in terms of university participation rates. Enrolment rates almost tripled in Asia and Middle East during from 1980 to 2000. Another striking feature is that the female participation rate has risen just as sharply as the male participation rate everywhere. That is, there is convincing evidence that higher education is globally more evident now than every before, irrespective of a country's socio-economic status, gender differences, cultural biases, or political conditions (although, of course, unevenly) [34]. This global trend is commonly referred to as 'massification' of higher education, and is expected

to continue over the coming years: from about 100 million students enrolled in various types of HEIs worldwide in 2000 to over 400 million by 2030 [6]. The same thing, of course, has happened in primary and secondary education [24].

This mushrooming has meant that higher education has become institutionalised in two ways. First, universities have become commensurable (comparable) organisations, each with identifiable administrative structures. Thus, in place of the tremendous diversity in how disciplines were organised in universities around the world in medieval times, we now have almost identical divisions of faculties, departments, administrative positions, financial systems, managerial policies, human resource strategies, and so on. This 'rationalisation' of the university system on modern lines has meant a drastic loss in diversity or difference, and tremendous pull toward uniformity that allows faculty and managers to be transferred or pulled away from one university to another, even across countries [20], [23].

Second, the institutionalisation has meant that universities are now incorporated into the modern nation-state as corporate bodies similar to other organisations like businesses and subject to the same pressures and controls. Thus, modern organisational trends like corporate mergers and financial harmonisation have swept across modern European universities like fashions. In the last decade, for instance, smaller departments have been abolished or merged into larger 'Schools' or 'Faculties', and administrative functions have multiplied but have also become centralised (from departments to central administration). At the same time, though, tighter and tighter academic sub-specialisations naturally emerge to carve out a niche for themselves in the growing homogeneity of similar, globally competing universities.

Another consequence of the explosive growth of universities since 1970 and simultaneous liberalisation of economies has been that states spend less and less proportion of their resources on higher education. Coupled with rising per-student costs and stagnation in government taxes, this has meant that universities increasingly rely on student tuition fees to survive financially [3; 69]. Private HEIs have mushroomed around the world to pick up the gap. The trend of massification, taken as a whole, means that higher education is now seen as a private doorway to measurable socio-economic success and a means of production rather than as an intangible 'public good' [7].

Utilitarianism

Therefore, higher education has been imbued with a distinctly utilitarian emphasis. Of course, the nature of this utilitarianism varies with socio-political conditions and with history: utilitarianism has never meant precisely the same thing in all situations [26]. And yet, the new University – characterised by 'excellence' rather than civilisation or culture – prioritises usefulness around the world. In fact, it is now an implicit aim of higher education everywhere that it must be of 'practical' use and, furthermore, that this use must extend beyond the individual to some measurable usefulness to society. Even a glance at modern European university mission statements confirms that all universities seek to add practical value to society. Consequently, the same is true of the research and teaching that universities must produce, or get rewarded for in terms of student tuition or public funding. The research must have 'industry' applications or 'policy relevance' in order to get funded, and teaching must prepare students to compete in international job markets.

Yet, it should be equally clear that the 'utility' that now defines the modern university is a normative function. That is, the only thing universal about 'utility' is the term itself that has taken on the status of a value. However, what is considered as being useful or practical has drastically changed even in the past century or so, and even in Europe, let alone in Asia or Africa. In other words, the nature of what is considered useful varies over time and space, but what remains constant is to justify certain types of changes in the university by terming them 'useful' or 'practical' for society.

Utility has become such a norm that when a university reform is termed 'useful' hardly anybody looks closer at it to see what, in fact, it is useful *for*. A good example of this is the rhetorical linking higher education improvement to macro-economic growth through the idea of a 'knowledge-based economy'. For instance:

> In Europe, government-funding patterns for university research have changed in recent years with a shift toward competitive problem-oriented or industry-oriented public programs. University researchers and research centers are encouraged to embark on collaborations with private companies including incentives to complement their research activities with technology-transfer activities [3; 187].

This is a mantra of national higher education reforms, yet there is surprisingly little evidence to substantiate such a link. In-depth research in the sociology of education has shown that neither does university student achievement correlate to national economic growth [29], [30], nor is there a statistically significant

correlation between higher education and the whole economic system of a country [23]. These results are quite startling for many, yet they conclusively show that the 'knowledge-based economy' is more of a myth than a reality, even in northern Europe or the United States that have advanced post-industrial economies.

Yet, this myth has taken a strong hold on university reformers everywhere. A clear application of this is that universities are now demanded to be more 'relevant' to society, both quantitatively in terms of research and student output, and qualitatively in terms of linkages especially with industry. This has meant, for instance, a tremendous privileging of resources to 'applied' sciences (including social sciences) over 'pure' (basic research), and greater student demand for these disciplines, as evident in just five years trend in Russia, for example [37]:

% of total graduates	**2004**	**2009**	**% change**
Engineering & manufacturing	19,7	22,0	**+** *25,9*
Social sciences, business, law, pedagogy	52,5	55,0	**+** *4,8*
Humanities & arts	5,2	3,5	**-** *32,7*

There has thus been a rapid growth in the applied physical and social sciences, including political science, economics, business management, and law, at the expense of basic natural sciences and humanities. This may be interpreted as a 'demystification' of the pursuit of humanities in the universities – and, indeed, reduction of the world to iron laws [28]. In any case it is clear that a practical turn has taken in place in what it prioritised in the university.

Thus, 'utilitarianism' is a label that obscures quite normative, and subjective, aims of higher education reform. This was quite evident in the past, for instance when British colonisers reformed Indian higher education between 1835 and 1904: the entire indigenous system of higher education was uprooted and replaced by an external system by terming the former 'useless' and the latter 'useful' [26]. In the process, new cultural schemes were institutionalised, such as secularism or replacing of local languages by English, and anti-collectivism in faculty. In modern times, it would be quite appropriate to collect the new cultural trends of higher education reform under the label of 'neoliberalism', provided that this term, too, is unpacked [17].

The global script of reform and global governors

These two macro-cultural features of 'neoliberalism' capture many trends common to higher education reform across northern Europe and, increasingly, across the world. The purpose here is not to identify an exhaustive list, but to argue for two undeniable categories and point out the elements within them. Of course, further evidence might bring to light other factors to include in each category and, possibly, to add to this list of cultural categories of higher education reform. However, such additions would still leave open the question of how this can possibly happen so widely and without much notice.

Possibly the single biggest factor in this neoliberal homogenisation is the ubiquitous presence of university rankings and league tables. The most popular ones – Times Higher Education World University Rankings (UK), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (China) and the QS World University Rankings (UK) – are highly influential amongst potential students. More importantly, university managers and governments looking to reform their institutions rely particularly on these rankings:

Higher education systems in both Europe and Asia have recently been going through significant restructuring processes to enhance their competitiveness and hierarchical positioning within their own countries and in the global market place. One major consequence of this is the intensified competition among universities to prove their performance through global university league tables or ranking exercises [8; 83–84].

It is now well-known that rankings determine what managers see as 'problems' and what solutions to move to [11], [19]. The rise of the 'entrepreneurial' and 'innovative' university model around the world is one example that is driven directly by managers looking at rankings and then reforming in a way that leads to 'colonisation of the academia by the market' [18]. Similarly, the notion of a 'world-class' university has led to the European Commission making heavy investments in the region to promote academic 'excellence' that can challenge North American institutions and Asian economies [8], [16]. University rankings thus serves to promote particular types of reforms, along the lines of the two cultural themes identified above.

Such higher education reforms fed by rankings are not limited to Europe or the EC. They are global phenomena but their very spread and breadth obscures the fact that the trend has an origin. The seeds of most

of the reforms in the past 20 years across northern Europe and USA in particular, but also elsewhere, can be found in two intergovernmental institutions: the World Bank and UNESCO. Since World War II, and increasingly since 1980, both institutions have dedicated considerable resources to defining and directing higher education. The Bank officially prioritised higher education in developing countries in 1994 [38]. But most of the concrete steps we can see in higher education reform today stem from the joint UNESCO/ World Bank task force report in 2000 [36].

In the 2000 report we find a distinct emphasis on massification across traditional social divisions [36; 9, 16, 91], the need to capitalise on the 'knowledge-based economy' [36; 9, 16, 34], and rationalising higher education into similar national managerial systems [36; 46, 50–52, 59, 64). Although the 2000 report focused on 'developing countries', its themes are universally applicable and, indeed, are evident throughout Europe as well as elsewhere. The crucial point is that the reforms suggested are not independent but are linked inevitably to global economic and social changes, such as neo-liberalism, privatisation, and low public taxes. At root, the report is built on the recognition that higher education enhances global labour productivity to fit into the new world capitalist system [32]. These factors are as relevant to sections of population with northern Europe as they are to entire countries in, say, sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia. However, the generic blueprint model of reform is locally applied to different conditions in different ways, and local history and culture are important in that 'domestication' [27].

There is, thus, evidence to suggest that not only is there a global 'script' for university reforms worldwide, but also global 'governors' who manage this script. Intergovernmental organisations play a key role in shaping higher education globally by way of encouraging reforms in certain directions that we can tentatively label as 'neoliberal'. (The same is true for basic education. Since WWII, the United Nations, World Bank and national development agencies have been increasingly directing the agenda of Education for All in developing countries [25].) University rankings, league tables, and copying 'world-class' universities are key mechanisms for diffusing these norms worldwide.

Epistemic governance and rule by consent

The fact that there are organisations devoted to steering higher education around the world in a certain way – i.e. global 'governors' – does not mean that these bodies are mysteriously powerful or somehow capable of dictating policies. Three factors are crucial to recognising this all-important point. First, as above, most of these organisations are responding to what they perceive as evident global changes, such as privatisation, reduction in tax collection, sharply rising demand for higher education among a growing middle class around the world, and so on. In that sense, the 'governors' are more like conduits of shifting world culture and politics who translate these global patterns into higher education reforms.

Second, these bodies are, after all, generally inter-*governmental* bodies. Thus, the World Bank or UNESCO or EC, for instance, are not homogenous and single-minded entities. Their decision-making bodies are composed of representatives of the almost 200 countries of the world, and their departments are subject to further influence from country offices. Furthermore, they are criss-crossed by international professional associations who are even more diffuse, such as international associations of professors and academics, international disciplinary associations, and so on. In many ways these International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) are the carriers of modern world culture and dictate what the problems are and how governments and international organisations need to address them. There is growing evidence from sociologists that these INGOs build and diffuse world culture, [4], [5] including the impulse to 'rationalise' higher education [23].

Third, it should be noted that national policies of higher education are, after all, *national*. There is no direct force or threat of sanctions, etc., that make individual countries conform to the global script. From northern Europe to sub-Saharan Africa, countries do produce the same educational reforms, but there is no compulsion in this. The most notable thing about similar reforms is that each country's policy-makers seem to genuinely believe that they are acting the nation's best interests [21]. It is now widely recognised that governance in today's world relies less on direct use of force but rather works through subtle means [12]. What is even more important is that these subtle ways consist of making the world appear in certain ways and of making certain solutions seem obvious or desirable, as captured by the term 'epistemic governance' [2].

In other words, social policy change is often implemented by national actors themselves, and it appears uniform around the world because these national actors have been trained to think in similar ways. The reforms are always aimed at making national institutions like universities the 'best in the world', and this takes place through international comparisons as in league tables and rankings. But from the policy-makers' perspectives, these are all very natural and self-evident moves. Epistemic assumptions about the social world are so similar in

modern times that these self-evident moves turn out to be similar. Countries keep an eye out on each others' policy moves and make similar moves themselves in all kinds of social policy arenas. This can be termed as interdependent policy-making [1] or as colonisation without an identifiable coloniser (similar to the Foucauldian idea of global Empire without and emperor [13]). That is, epistemic governance involves rules by implicit consent, not as in an unwritten social contract but in a much more subtle and hidden way by playing on the assumptions we all have about what the world is and how it works.

More research is needed into specific empirical cases using this framework. Given the strong consent around the world for similar reforms, hardly any alternatives appear viable. Yet, one fact is clear: all these reforms are future-oriented, working on national policy-makers' desire to *become* more modern and globally relevant according to the how the world now appears to them. As such, *local* histories surrounding each university are ignored in these reforms. One option to escape the wave of neoliberal reforms sweeping around the world is to pay more attention to local communities and histories. In other words, the future lies in the past.

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