How do universities compete? Introduction to the special issue

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ABSTRACT

Competition in higher education seems ubiquitous. Universities today compete for values such as diversity and internationality in the same way as they compete for innovation, impact and employability. The meaning and perception of competition in higher education have changed substantially within the last decades. Competition today is imperative, attribute and action. It is detached from distinct frames – relevant in political science, sociology and economics alike – and both measure and goal in itself. Given the centrality and ambiguity of competition in higher education today, understanding how competition operates is central to grasping contemporary dynamics that reshape higher education. Against this background, the question 'How do universities compete?' relates to a constructivist perspective that critically reflects research frames on competition in two distinct ways. First, this perspective refrains from adapting comprehensive economic or sociological frames to higher education without taking the specificities of higher education into account. Second, such a context-sensitive view on competitions corresponds with attention to the level and form of agency competing organisations exhibit. Overall, the contributions in this special issue provide context-sensitive analytical frames that respond to empirically observable competition in higher education. The way universities compete depends on contextual factors of how competition is organised, the role of intermediaries as well as the interrelationship between state agency and organisational self-perceptions as acting organisations. Initially directed at increasing efficiency, competition is characterised nowadays by a wide range of intended and unintended effects that will be identified and discussed in this special issue.

Competition in higher education seems ubiquitous. Universities worldwide are said to compete for reputation, financial resources and talent in multiple arenas (Krücken 2019). This includes competition for world class (Shin and Kehm 2013), public funding (Brewer, Gates, and Goldman 2001; Fischer and Wigger 2016), third party funding (Münch 2013), students (Marginson 2006; Taylor and Cantwell 2015), as brands (Drori et al. 2014a), in economic models (De Fraja and Iossa 2002), in rankings (Wedlin 2011; Espeland and Sauder 2016), for accreditation (Alajoutsijärvi, Kettunen, and Sohlo 2018) and so on. But competition not only takes place between universities; nation states compete in building world-class universities (Rust and Kim 2012) and individuals compete

for reputation and jobs (Hamann 2019). While omnipresent in the discourse and analysis of higher education today, the list of competitions highlights that precisely the pervasiveness of the term makes it unclear. It blends out the premises under which universities *do* compete.

In the long institutional history of universities competition among them has only recently become a *global* phenomenon. Several of the above-mentioned arenas and instruments have a short history. While there has been rivalry between universities since the Middle Ages and early modern times (cf. Wiesenfeldt 2016) and universities have been playing a crucial role in state comparisons for centuries (Levine 2021), explicit 'competitiveness policies' that address universities, i.e. policies that operationalise competition as an explicit policy instrument and provide means for establishing competitive arenas, only date back to developments in the US and the UK in the 1980s (Slaughter and Leslie 1997). It was not before the 1990s that the idea of world-class universities diffused globally. The success story of global university rankings even dates back only to the early 2000s. The policy imperatives of the 1980s were tightly knit to reforms infusing higher education with a market rationale (of students, for innovation, etc.) while often falling short of building actual markets. Against planning schemes and in view of funding constraints, economic policies across sectors emphasised the importance of organisational autonomy and incentives for competition. Alluding to efficiency gains and economic growth (e.g. through technology transfer), competition was seen as a lever that could 'solve all problems of higher education instantly', as Ulrich Teichler (1991, 43) ironically noted. The meaning and perception of competition in higher education and especially among universities has however changed substantially within the last decades. Rankings, accreditations and even funding contests refer more to what has come to be known as status competitions (cf. Brankovic 2018), attributing cultural agency to universities that transcends supply-and-demand-curved action frames. Universities today compete for values such as diversity and internationality as much as they compete for innovation, impact and employability. Competition expands beyond policy, market and status frames, and has become both a measure and a goal in itself for universities. In policy texts, reports and mission statements, competition is an imperative directed at universities, a self-description and a form of action that is often devoid or in need of explanation and legitimation. As imperative, attribute and action competition has become institutionalised in higher education. As a global phenomenon competition draws on changes in the environment of universities that allow to see them as competing units.

First, higher education policies across the globe frame universities and their subunits increasingly as competitive organisational actors (De Boer, Enders, and Leisyte 2007; Enders, de Boer, and Weyer 2013; Hasse and Krücken 2013; Krücken 2019; Musselin 2018). Inspired by the stronger role of the university as organisation in the US, they have shifted from systemic and sectorial approaches to higher education (Wilbers and Brankovic 2023) towards politically infusing organisations with actorhood and aspiration. Such policies assume that universities and their subunits *can* act as organisations, and that they *will* act competitively by themselves (Bloch 2021; cf. Bromley 2021).

Second, a wide range of (global) intermediaries initiated, reinforced or joined this process, reiterating benchmarks and scales that establish comparative arenas in which different social units are visualised as autonomous actors struggling for success. In the way responsibility is transferred to universities *and* their sub-units and the competition-evoking arenas multiply the level of uncertainty increases. Universities remain embedded in national regulations, multiple standards and measures of uncertain competitive value. This complexity can lead to both isomorphism and differentiation. In looking at role models or by adapting global scripts of 'good management' universities become more similar. By adapting these to local contexts (Drori et al. 2014b), by building unique profiles and practices (Drori et al. 2014a) or by occupying niches (Baier and Schmitz 2019) universities differentiate. Colleagues, partners and competitors constantly (re-)negotiate what is at stake, without necessarily agreeing on what they compete for and how this competition actually takes place. Moreover, the value of status signals differs by level. A university ranking may be relevant to the organisation but not for its academic members. Publication output and impact factors may

influence academic careers but play only a minor role when assessing a higher education system at the national level. This inherent fuzziness of competition opens space for variation.

Third, universities position themselves in multiple competitions (Krücken 2019). They are simultaneously involved in different competitions for different forms of scarcity with different competitors and third parties. Crucially, their performance in one competition may affect participation in other competitions. Multiple competitions come with different, potentially conflicting expectations, thus leading to inconsistencies on the organisational level (cf. Bromley and Meyer 2015). Universities need to compare and evaluate the different competitions' dimensions and goods (reputation, personnel, students, unique selling propositions, etc.). They have to decide which demands they want to cater to and how to address them, and they have to take into account how their choice affects demands and expectations in other competitions.

The shift of competition in higher education away from academics and nation states to the organisation, i.e. the idea that universities compete as holistic cultural entities capable of eliciting action for their own purposes, and the accompanying uncertainty that the distribution of organisational action provokes raises questions on whether and how organisations and their sub-units appropriate such imperatives, integrate them into their operations and indeed perceive themselves as competing actors, and how this can be empirically observed and theoretically comprehended. While competition has often been addressed as driver, implied as a mode of action or derived from a range of economic or sociological models, it has rarely been investigated as a distinct phenomenon in higher education itself. In posing the simple question 'How do universities compete?' this special issue aims to provide a range of approaches that respond to this question comprehensively, suggest context-sensitive theorising and set the spotlight on the distinct role of competition in and for higher education.

Research on competition in higher education

Competition has become a common theme in research on higher education. While topics range from international student flows over rankings to academic entrepreneurship, competition is rarely conceptualised as a distinct social process in higher education. In the research literature, competition mostly adheres to one of three distinct meanings: market competition, competition as a distinct form of social action, and third-party status competition.

In many papers, competition is *derived* from modelling higher education as a market or empirically from a range of reform policies labelled as 'neoliberal' (Olssen 2016; Jessop 2008), 'academic capitalism' (Slaughter and Leslie 1997; Münch 2013) or 'marketisation' (Brown 2011). In the first case, organising processes in higher education are analytically assumed to follow market logics: Higher education just as any other social sub-system can be analysed through the lens of contemporary economic and business theories (human capital and student consumer markets, marketing, etc.). Education-specific classifications such as students and degrees are substituted or refined through notions of 'consumers', 'market demand', 'brands', 'positional goods' etc. (e.g. Demange, Fenge, and Uebelmesser 2020). Competition operates as the crucial organising mode that either induces efficiency or promotes reform policies. In the latter case, these classificatory endeavours by economists, governments and policies are problematised as inciting processes of educational commodification. Such approaches include straightforward critiques of market assumptions (Leslie and Johnson 1974; Marginson 2013) or accounts of neoliberal or market competition within its historical context (e.g. Schulze-Cleven 2020). In taking a middle course, researchers have suggested to discuss the transformations as 'quasi-markets' (Clark 1998), 'market-like structures' (Dill 2003) or have taken contextual specificities into account (Jongbloed 2003; Jungblut and Vukasovic 2018). Supporters, critics and context-sensitive conceptualisations however take markets as the dominant frame on which competition depends.

Another way of addressing competition goes back to Weberian conflict-theoretical assumptions. Such research assumes that individuals and universities are to a large extent shaped through power

relations. Competition is operationalised as a distinct form of social action, that of a pacified fight (Weber 2005, 32). Seen this way competition is the *sine qua non* and a natural mode of organising in higher education (e.g. Merton 1973). While in the past such competition was mostly assumed as operating between individuals and/or nation states, policy changes in the last decades have led to increased competition of universities and their subunits on a global scale (Marginson 2006). Power-based approaches range from population ecology (e.g. van Vught 2008) to variations of field theory (Bourdieu 1998; Berman and Paradeise 2016). Such meso-level approaches have contributed sub-stantially to the understanding of contemporary changes in higher education. Framing competition as a distinct form of social action however often lacks differentiation and contextualisation: We seem to know what competition is and we can see it increasing in the aggregate.

A third stream of research refers to status competition. Originally developed to re-contextualise markets and explain the stickiness of market advantages external to efficiency distributions (Podolny 2005), status competition has become detached from market frames and applied to higher education (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny 2012; Brankovic 2018). Initially understood as a conservative element, status is here taken to incite competitive dynamics. A large part of the literature addresses devices or intermediaries – rankings, seals, competitive funding schemes, selection procedures, etc., their (commensurating) performativity (Espeland and Stevens 1998; Espeland and Sauder 2016) and how they build a time-bound and partially transparent social space in contests (Stark 2020; Bloch and Mitterle 2017). Being evaluated in such contests 'causes organisations to reflect upon what they do and how they do it' (Brandtner 2017, 203). This reflexivity leads to changes in the organisations' behaviour. While instructive in understanding competition in higher education and detached from the market frame, status is often presented as an abstract commensurating 'meta-capital', an explanation in itself. There is a close relationship between the status competition literature and a sociology of competition that has theorised devices and intermediaries as third parties to whom actors appeal in order to gain competitive advantage vis-à-vis other actors (cf. Simmel [1908] 1992; Werron 2015; Arora-Jonsson, Brunsson, and Hasse 2020).

Across these three streams of research run conceptions of universities' strategic actorhood (Thoenig and Paradeise 2018). Whether they are driven by markets, conflict or status, universities are assumed to act strategically vis-à-vis environmental expectations of competition (Frølich, Christensen, and Stensaker 2019; Fumasoli and Huisman 2013). A vast literature in higher education research has carved out how universities are being recast as organisational actors across the globe (Frank and Meyer 2020; Krücken and Meier 2006; Ramirez 2010; Zapp, Marques, and Powell 2021). In some countries, structural conditions may hamper the development of universities' stra-tegic actorhood while in others it has already been institutionalised for a long time (Thoenig and Paradeise 2016; Whitley 2008; 2012). Yet in many higher education systems this drive to strategic actorhood has been a recent development. Faced with strong environmental pressures to converge, universities exhibit different levels of actorhood, depending on their internal governance, identity and position in the organisational field (Fumasoli, Barbato, and Turri 2020). Universities increasingly morph around models of actorhood that at the same time call for differentiated organisational action in the name of the self (Bloch 2021). Research that analyses organisational action *in* competition through (digital) self-descriptions (Kosmützky 2012; Taylor and Morphew 2010; Mitterle, Reisz, and Stock 2018), expert interviews or senate protocols (Mayer 2019) shows how universities speak and act in competition. Such fragmented evidence of the self-rationalisation of organisations as compet-ing actors is crucial for the question asked here, yet it is rarely integrated into a broader frame of competitive action in market, status or conflict settings.

Analysing organisational action in competition also raises the question of how universities navi-gate multiple competitions and consider the effects of their strategic decisions (Krücken 2019). Research has addressed the interaction effects of multiple rankings (Espeland and Sauder 2016), stra-tegic decisions of university management in view of multiple competitions (Bilevičiūtė et al. 2019), positioning practices of universities (Cantner et al. 2023) or cooperation in competition (Kosmützky

and Krücken 2023). While research on multiple competitions has been expanding recently, it is still in its early stages, lacking country diversity and a more systematic theorisation.

Outlook of the special issue

Given the centrality and ambiguity of competition in higher education today, understanding how competition operates is central to grasping contemporary dynamics that reshape higher education. The question 'How do universities compete?' relates to a constructivist perspective that critically reflects research frames on competition in two distinct ways.

First, it shares a critical view on adapting comprehensive economic or sociological frames to higher education without taking the specificities of higher education into account. Contextual factors from policy choice over inherent logics of academic research to the level of state power structure the way in which universities can act and produce distinct cultural frames that affect the form of competition at play.

Second, such a context-sensitive view on competitions corresponds with attention to the level and form of agency competing organisations exhibit. For some competitions new hyper-organisations are formed to achieve success, while in others clear lines of distinction are drawn between organisations, sectors and states. The contributions address questions on the form of competitive action as well as interaction effects among the multiple contests and competitions.

Against the meta-narratives of marketisation and neo-liberalisation that are said to transform higher education governance *Kimmo Alajoutsijärvi, Kerttu Kettunen* and *Rómulo Pinheiro* argue for a more differentiated view on competition. They identify four distinct ideologies driving contemporary higher education governance and the transformation of universities into organisational actors – neoliberalism, managerialism, shareholderism and stakeholderism. Each of these ideologies promotes distinct structural configurations that lead to very different forms of competition.

Alexander Mitterle and *Roland Bloch* also take the idea of a market-deduced competition as their starting point but focus on the meaning and making of markets in higher education. Contrasting Burton Clark's market telos with Michel Callon's analytical frame of market *agencements* they show that the market term in higher education is often related to less hierarchic ways of governance rather than a precise 'good' to be traded. Advancing from the void of the 'good' and status competition they argue that higher education is structured by a distinct form of competition directed at the relational positionality of organisational actors: that of field competition.

Emily Levine and *Mitchell Stevens* develop a historical approach to competition in higher education. Starting from a contextually informed understanding of status they discuss competition within a historically emergent system of rivalry specific to higher education. Operationalised as competitive emulation – a 'dance of cooperation and competition' – they highlight the dependency of universities on recognition by others, especially from those at the top. By emulating them, universities induce innovations that in the long run may outperform those they were initially modelled on. Surfacing this phenomenon enables fresh understandings of how competition and competing in higher education differ from practices in economic fields and other contexts.

Ravit Mizrahi-Shtelman and *Gili Drori* discuss the interplay of multiple competitions and how these fuel organisational agency of higher education institutions in Israel. In drawing on strategic forms of self-description they make competitive action of universities observable and identify their distinct positioning practices. The expressions function as intersections in the complex array of competitions in which Israeli universities interact. They expose an organisational referentiality of higher education institutions that builds attachments to different status groups matching their self-perception.

The interface between universities and federal states in Germany is at the centre of *Tim Seidenschnur*, *Nicolai Götze* and *Georg Krücken*'s analysis. Taking funding contests in German higher education as an empirical example they show how not only universities but also states in a federal system compete for status and funding in a specific arena. While funding contests were introduced to

increase competition between universities, their status effects have also led the states to construct competition between them which adds a new level to the multiplicity of competitions.

Going beyond Western accounts of competition and actorhood, *Miguel Antonio Lim, Bing Liu* and *Zhuo Sun* analyse how competition is operationalised in Chinese national policy documents and institutional strategies of Chinese universities. In China, competition is state-organised and directed at establishing a distinct stratification between universities, often blurring the line between (regional) state influence and university action. What distinguishes competition here from Western accounts is a Confucian idea of harmony that leads to a cautious support scheme among geographically close organisations to buffer competitive failure.

In critically reflecting on the analytical frame of this special issue *David Frank* and *John Meyer* address the urgency that often accompanies descriptions of increasing competition in higher education. They problematise the reductionist frame that comes with posing 'how?'-questions with regard to competitive action by universities. In critically reflecting the scope of the special issue they emphasise the productive nature of competition in enlarging the 'canopy' of the university as a vast global institution.

Overall, the contributions in this special issue provide context-sensitive analytical frames that respond to empirically observable competitions in higher education. Collectively making a case for 'varieties of competition' in higher education (Naidoo 2018) they show that the multiple competitions evoked in the contemporary higher education landscape come with multiple forms of competition; they have increased in number as well as in variety. There are more competitions, and there are more competitions of a different kind. The way universities compete depends on contextual factors of how competition is organised, the role of intermediaries as well as the interrelationship between state agency and organisational self-perceptions as acting organisations. Competition has also broader effects, as *David Frank* and *John Meyer* remind us, not just strengthening the role of the university in contemporary society but also continuously raising the funds provided for higher education institutions. Initially directed at increasing efficiency, competition in higher education in the long run might become a tide that lifts all universities. Against a blurry and far-reaching policy imperative and through their analytic variety and width, the contributions to the special issue draw attention to the contexts and practices of how universities compete.

Disclosure statement

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