

Higher education research as a separate area of study has only recently been developed. A justification for the 'delay' of higher education research is that it has become an important focus of interest only when higher education entered the mass threshold, configuring a major financial and political issue.

This new area began to develop in the 1960s, in American universities (California at Berkeley, SUNNY Buffalo, Yale, Michigan). Only several years later has the field attracted the attention of social scientists in Europe, namely in the UK and Sweden. For Maassen there are differences in its development between the US and Europe, one of them being a strict divide in Europe between micro-level research on teaching and learning and research on organizational, political and economic aspects of higher education, the latter being the core of higher education research in Europe.

Major research efforts were aimed at the system level (Clark, Becher and Koogan, Teichler, etc.) and, in parallel, at governmental steering of the system (Neave and Van Vught, Kerr). Not only was the 'idea' of higher education discussed (Scott, Barnett, etc.), but also the issue of how to widen access of higher education for the majority of citizens. Studies on diversity and diversification were developed (Goedegebuure, Meek, Huisman).

We may argue that research on higher education reflects three different rationales: the managerial, the consulting and the social sciences approaches. The first rational, very present in international research organizations, has assumed management issues and goals, such as institutional performance, effectiveness, efficiency, etc., as privileged focus for research. The consulting approach was developed mainly in the framework of political advisors of Ministries of Education and presently also the European Commission, being the research goals mainly connected to implementation issues. The third approach, developed by social scientists, does not aim at 'solving' problems or 'advising' policy-makers and public officials responsible for policy implementation, but rather to find regularities observed when studying social objects. And as the research focus moved to the institutional level, these three approaches tended to mix.