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DEBATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ACADEMICS AND PRACTITIONERS IN THE HIGHER EDUCATION FIELD**

Abstract. *In this article we present findings from focus groups (FGs) consisting of academics and practitioners in the higher education (HE) field from different parts of the world, who debated their perceptions of the current state of the art in the HE field. The main findings, which call for further research, as well as activities of academics, practitioners and policymakers at various levels, are as follows: 1) there is a gap between basic academic research and applied research (with the latter often not meeting the appropriate conceptual level), which needs to be closed; 2) this gap is expressed also in the global context of the HE field; 3) multi-disciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity, methodological quality of both basic and applied research need to be developed and 4) scholars' practitioners' and governments' (policymakers') responsibilities need to be addressed.*

Keywords: *higher education (HE), research, academics, practitioners, government, policy*

Introduction

The aim of this article is to contribute to academic critical self-reflections on the issue of relationships between academics and practitioners (as first developed by Caplan, 1979) generally and in the HE field in particular. We do this by presenting focus group (FG) debates related to the various kinds of fragmentation in the higher education (HE) field and the need to 'speak to each other' more while giving special attention to the relationship between academics and practitioners in this field. The in-depth debate among focus group participants (FGPs) coming from different geopolitical contexts is valuable both for further academics' and practitioners' reflections based on research as well as for critical policy reflections in various institutions at the national and international levels.

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As a rule, the relation between academic research and practice has been an issue debated in many fields. Among them have been international relations (Hill and Beshoff, eds., 1994), finances (Cagle *et al.*, 1997), management (Brennan, 2004), computer science, education, healthcare, information systems, library and information science, management, nursing, political science, psychology, sociology and social work (Belli, 2010; Lahat, 2019), emergency management (Cwiak, 2007), disaster management (Browne *et al.*, 2018) and increasingly the field of public health (Smith and Wilkins, 2018) as well as library and information science (Chang, 2021).

The HE field is no exception. As a relatively young research area, HE is significantly influenced by intertwining relations among researchers, various stakeholders and actors, and especially, specialised centres and institutions in HE as well as international organisations that have all initiated many projects, which have largely impacted the development of HE worldwide. Indeed, analysts of the HE field have different motivations for entering into HE research. Often they simultaneously play several different roles. Also, they are active in various organisations and forums. Streitwieser and Ogden (2016) talk about a hybrid group of scholar-practitioners, who primarily work in administration in the USA but at the same time contribute to analysis in the field.

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What has become a particularly burning issue in the HE field is the dominant global impact of both – academics and practitioners – coming from the western part to other parts of the world. In this article, we focus on two research questions: Are the *state of the art* of the HE field generally and the relationships between academics and practitioners in the HE field in particular perceived in the same way by HE academics and practitioners from different parts of the world? Can insights from experts belonging to non-Western parts of the world add to a new quality to the academic and practitioner knowledge and practice in the HE field?

Our research approach is qualitative and exploratory. In order to answer these research questions, we consider the changing real-life context as well as perceptions of these issues expressed by academics and practitioners in the HE field coming from various parts of the world in order to participate in focus groups (FG). In the article, we summarise the findings of FG participants' (FGPs') debates on their perceptions of the current *state of the art* of the HE field, including the several critical issues in relations mentioned between academics and practitioners.

Based on good practices in analysing and reporting FG results (Krueger, 1998), in the following sections, we first draw the background of our research and explain in more detail the methodology used in our research. The following section presents summaries of the FG debates – the actual voices of the FGPs. We conclude with several interpretations and a few

research and policy ideas for further engagement of academics and practitioners in the HE field.

Background

Developments in the HE field

In the last 30 years, the HE research field became more vivid due to several preconditions: 1) the emergence of various international organisations, which tremendously contributed to the rise of policy analysis in HE; 2) the contemporary development and rising numbers of universities and higher education institutions (HEIs), its changed roles in society and increased networking and new collaboration models; 3) the growth of various research and policy centres in the HE field across the globe; 4) the development of individual courses and full study programmes in HE at all three study levels (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral) worldwide; 5) growing numbers of various actors and policymakers participating in the global HE arena at various levels; and 6) professionalisation of administration inside the HEIs, various agencies, organisations and institutions that are involved in HE. In addition, the process of Europeanisation and various supranational initiatives, policies, programmes and recommendations created in policy coordination at the EU level significantly influenced European research of HE.

In the process of globalisation, many new actors inside the emerging HE arena were eager to get actively involved in processes inside HE. It consequently led to the initiation of many projects and the preparation of publications by various stakeholders, e.g. national and supranational financed projects and international organisations' collaborations with researchers in the HE field (e.g. Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), International Association of Universities (IAU), Magna Charta Observatory, European University Association (EUA), Academic Cooperation Association (ACA), British Council, Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD), etc.).

In the last twenty to thirty years, this new context significantly impacted the development of HE research by bringing a wide spectrum of diverse topics to the field. By the 2000s, theoretical, policy and practical developments in different areas of the HE field had been more broadly recognised (e.g. Teichler and Sadlack, eds., 2000; Fumasoli and Stensaker, 2013). In relation to the scope of our article, the literature shows that since recently, researchers have been increasingly analysing, for example, collaboration models among academics, executives and professionals in the HE (Jones *et al.*, 2012), the changing role of the academic profession (Kehm and Teichler, eds., 2012), the rise of management and administration professionalisation

inside the university (e.g. Middlehurst, 2009; Zinner, ed., 2016; Macfarlane and Burg, 2019), and roles and identities related to their increasing involvement in various analytical projects on different HE topics (Whitchurch, 2012).

Academics vs practitioners in the HE field

The relationships between academics and practitioners have been gaining interest not only in the HE field. Indeed, a whole new wave of debate on the relevance of the ‘two communities theory’ (Caplan, 1979) has been taking place in many disciplines and fields. Caplan’s distinction between knowledge producer and policymaker is challenging European Union practices of triggering analyses in the HE field, mostly by the development of supranational umbrella policies in HE (notably the Bologna Process and Lisbon Process) and the variety of programmes and projects initiated and financed at the EU level. In such a context, the roles of policymakers and stakeholders inside HEIs and HE in general have rarely been analysed (e.g. Marshall, 2018; Wise *et al.*, 2020).

There have, however, been some case studies that, for example, focused on the emergence of different models of HE in the global context (e.g. Marginson, 2011), the particular role of the OECD as a policy actor in the interplay of organisational, governmental and stakeholder interests (Harmsen and Braband, 2021), public sector reforms as a contextual factor which may impact the HE (Friedrich, 2021), and the peculiar Chinese context and principal philosophies in the HE field (Wu and Li, 2021).

Still, the connections and relations between researchers, policymakers and stakeholders have not yet been systematically analysed in the HE literature. Nevertheless, a widening diversity of the roles which practitioners and scholars play has been recognised (Hudzik, 2016) as well as the shaping of scholar-practitioner identity (Heyl, 2016) and the isolation of scholars and practitioners within their own worlds (Hunter and Rumbly, 2016).

Rare examples (e.g. Streitwieser and Ogden, eds., 2016) do present multiple views on the relationships between academics and practitioners. However, they are primarily linked to case studies in one particular subfield, such as international education.

Research method

In this article, we present empirical results gathered using the FG method (e.g. Krueger, 1998; Ferguson, 2000; Wilkinson, 2016; Brown, 2018). As an FG is a participatory process (Mukherjee *et al.*, 2018) which enables discussion with a synergistic output (Ferguson, 2000), the empirical results gathered

in two FG sessions held in the last quarter of 2019 in a neutral environment are outcomes of spontaneous interactions among participants. Experts discussed their perceptions, estimations and opinions on the current *state of the art* in the HE field.

The strategy for the selection of FGPs was to sample them from the pool of potential FGPs (Krueger, 1998: 71). This pool was revealed based on the *snowball* sampling (identifying potential respondents based on publications on issues of internationalisation, Europeanisation and globalisation in HE field, which was later amended according to the suggestions of the respondents contacted). Besides that, additional criteria for the selection of FGPs were applied (gender, representation of scholars and practitioners, variation in main disciplines, countries, geographical locations and more/less international orientation). The participants' main disciplines included educational sciences (including higher education, and science and technology studies), political science, sociology, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, public policy and organisational studies. More details and some of our findings have already been presented in Dagen and Fink-Hafner (2016), Fink-Hafner and Dagen (2017) and Fink-Hafner et al. (2019).

The aim was to select an optimal number of FG participants (around eight); however, extraordinary natural circumstances in 2019 prevented the actual arrival of all the invited participants on the spot. This is why in the first FG six scholars and practitioners participated – three male and three female scholars – coming from younger, middle and senior generations, from six countries (England-UK, Ethiopia, Hong Kong, Mexico, Scotland-UK and Slovenia), in which they have current positions and are involved in teaching and/or research in the HE field in institutions of various kinds – national but also one very globalised institution. In the second FG, seven participants took part – four male and three female scholars and practitioners from younger, middle and senior generations, from seven countries (England-UK, Finland, Hong Kong, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and USA), in which they currently have positions. They are involved in teaching and/or research in the HE field in institutions of various kinds – national and also two very globalised institutions. In addition (due to extraordinary travelling circumstances in autumn 2019), prior to this FG session, one interview was conducted with a participant from Hong Kong with his approval to share his thoughts.

The analysis is based on transcripts. In line with the rules for FG reporting (Krueger, 1998) we present a summary description of the FG debates including the observations of their characteristics like (dis)agreements and illustrative quotes. The presentation is followed by an interpretation and concluding thoughts.

Summary of focus group findings

In this section we present the voice of the FGPs while debating the *state of the art* in the HE field. At the end of the quotes, we note the country from which the particular FGP came to take part in an FG meeting. Quotes have only been minimally language edited to be readable.

Context: Pressure from governments and the economy challenging the HE field, including academic–practitioner relationships

FGPs took time to debate complex pressures under which the HE field has been developing, particularly pressures coming from governments at various levels, as well as economic pressures, which have all contributed to multiplication of academic–practitioner issues.

Government pressures on the HE field have been estimated from different angles, which might be, at least to some extent, linked to the various contexts from which FGPs were coming. On the one hand, FGPs stated that the pressures have worked in favour of the development of the HE field. For example, an FGP from Mexico (FG1) revealed the positive role of governments in Latin American countries. More precisely, governments' need for the information on HE institutions to monitor the HE system contributed to the creation of particular units dedicated to producing such information. Later, those units developed into research centres or research units in the HE field (e.g. inside the universities).

On the other hand, other FGPs pointed at government pressures, which have been restricting the development of the HE field. Among such examples are the utilisation of the HE field for the nationalist national agenda and the diminishment of opportunities for development of the HE field.

...in the South-West Pacific and in Africa... universities are seen by governments as very important drivers of nationalisation, nationalism, and of development. But is a two-edged sword because at the same time those governments are very unwilling to tolerate what they might call dissent or disagreement in universities. (USA, FG2)

Furthermore, HE researchers have been pressured to support particular government's policies without question. As stated by one FGP, governments' expectations are that

higher education researchers collect data that confirm the brightness and great ideas of the government in the field of higher education... they

do not expect critical views on trends analysed in depth where the present policy doesn't work, where we have to change. (Slovenia, FG1)

At least indirectly, public policies contribute to economic pressures on the HE field. Some governments use funding as a soft policy tool in ensuring supportive HE research. As an FGP from England-UK (FG1) revealed, this mode of government pressure does not appear in interpreting data, but it is rather seen in *'the direct funding of proposals that appeal to the government based on the American model. It's a phenomenon that we need to be concerned about'* (England-UK, FG1).

However, it is not only national governments that put pressure on the HE field. FGPs agreed that government pressures also come from the supranational level, particularly in the case of the Bologna Process research. The interference of governmental and economic pressures has been particularly noticed in the marketisation of universities and in pressures to meet the needs of the labour market and job transformations. Here, somewhat different FGP views were expressed. On the one hand, the economically adaptive HE field was acknowledged together with a notion that educators have a responsibility to train. In contrast, some FGPs stressed the importance of keeping researchers' critical distance when working on the projects initiated by governments and (international) organisations in which various stakeholders participate, as they use data analysis for setting the new agenda at different levels and make policies related to the HE. This is why several FGPs clearly supported the idea that concepts like job transformation should only be accepted in the HE field together with the need for critical thinking. This is very important, as HE is not only about educating workers but also about educating citizens.

Internal challenges of a very fragmented HE field

The complex academic-practitioner relationship came forward while FGPs debated the overall characteristics of the HE field.

Double challenges related to the recognition of the HE field. Even today, the HE academic field is found to be challenged by misunderstandings on the part of some university teachers who argue that *'we all teach at universities'* (Ethiopia, FG1). HE as an independent research field also often faces doubts from scholars in other disciplines. FGPs do not have a black-and-white answer to these challenges of the HE field, as stated by one FGP:

...it was defined in the 1990s that higher education is a field of research defined by the object of research, which is HE. We all are interested in HE as a social phenomenon from different aspects. Sociologists of science

say: 'You are not theoretical, you are not real, you are just studying the organisation.' This is both true and untrue. (Finland, FG2)

This statement is also strongly supported by participants, who, besides having academic careers, also have previous experience in the management of international organisations.

Differences in engagement around the globe. FGPs acknowledge that different levels of engagement in the HE field exist around the globe. They pointed out that approaches in HE vary significantly across the globe, which consequently impacts the field of HE research.

FGPs who have previous experience in working for various global and international organisations, especially in less developed countries and world regions, or who originate from a non-Western part of the world, more clearly emphasise the global predominance of westernisation and the Western way of thinking in HE, both among academics and practitioners. As stated by one participant, *'I think that the whole discussion we are having is very often Western-centric'* (Ethiopia, FG1).

However, an FGP from Hong Kong (FG1) pointed to a unique example of Chinese development of the HE field. This FGP revealed the pragmatic embracing of mainstream concepts in international education while presenting their shortcomings in relation to research in China. This strategy also includes encouraging English language learning in China and engaging Chinese readers in communicating with the rest of the world while universities are simultaneously encouraged to produce their own work in their own language and publish internationally as well.

All in all, FGPs with experiences beyond the academic milieu more openly express their personal opinion on differences in HE research field and policies worldwide in comparison with their colleagues, who more cautiously address certain issues in HE and build their attitudes from scientific empirical evidence.

Furthermore, the debate showed there are vast differences between centres and peripheries in HE, even across the European HE landscape. For example, an FGP from Slovenia (FG1) stressed that the Balkans region is very different from Western Europe because of the delay in establishing HE as an academic field. Similarly, an FGP from Mexico (FG1) pointed out the delayed and still poor development of the HE field in Latin America compared with the USA, especially as scholars study HE in a fragmented way, as the HE research field is not supported by communities, associations, conferences and journals specialising exclusively in HE.

Directions of making an impact. FGPs agreed that, although criticised, HE research is still broadly perceived to be mainly Western-centric and fragmented. Consequently, scholars and experts who belong to the HE research

field community sometimes speak even of hegemony over the less developed, both in academic and practitioners' activities. The leaders'–followers' difference was illustrated particularly with the rhetorical question, *'If you have research projects together, who is really setting the agenda?'* (Ethiopia, FG1).

Nevertheless, FGPs with experience in the African and Asian HE context noticed very different strategies and outcomes of HE policies in less developed countries. The debate showed that the engagement of Western world scholars and experts in the development of HE systems in less developed world regions is one side of the coin while HE policies of the less developed countries are in reality the other side of the same coin. In addition, there are also mutual misunderstandings.

FGPs pointed to peculiarities they found in non-Western regions. They experienced that African governments often seek recommendations from the outside, and generally, from a *'high-level Western people'* (Ethiopia, FG1). However, conflictual issues arise in the process of 'importing' from the West regarding the following questions: who sets the priorities?; which issues are included in the trainings?; and what examples are used? In the case of Ethiopia, an example of a diversity issue was pointed out as very important topic in this country. However, as one FGP explains, the training on gender equality was criticised as being *'all about European policies'* (Ethiopia, FG1) that *'simply do not apply to an Ethiopian situation'* (Ethiopia, FG1).

Still, insights from other FPGs show that some countries and regions, especially those belonging to the Third World, in some cases also use policies of sending their own students to international universities in the West and promote elite students on the way to the international arena. Consequently, this also affects HE research tremendously.

Nevertheless, FGPs recognised that in some parts of the world with delays in developing the HE field, following what is produced in the USA and Europe may appear as a conscientious strategy. The understanding that following the *state of the art* is necessary while trying to build one's own capacity was explicitly noted by one FGP:

We keep translating theories, approaches, methodologies... because... we are also embedded in this globalised world where you have to chase the best universities all the time. (Mexico, FG1)

In contrast, in some of the countries with colonial historical roots, there are heated debates on what kind of policies should be developed in HE and how this field should be analysed. One FGP cited a new quality emerging in such debates in Africa, stressing the need to assume responsibility for their own development: *'we Africans should stop blaming everything*

on colonialism because otherwise we will never move on...' (England - UK, FG1).

Another alternative strategy was revealed in the case of China. While stressing the necessity of taking part in the global arena in which HE issues are being discussed, the FGP from Hong Kong (FG1) estimated that concepts developed in the West are not sufficient, appropriate and ready just to be copied in conceptualising the situation in the world. However, instead of a debate on internationalisation as westernisation and as Americanisation, the FGP rather suggested to open a debate, which would

bring out the new insights, or hopefully we can have a new paradigm in understanding the world through comparative and international perspectives... the world is so different, so we can accept that we are different and also embrace diversity. (Hong Kong, FG1)

Disciplinarity vs multidisciplinary vs interdisciplinary

Issues of academic-practitioner relationships in the HE field are additionally complicated by HE field fragmentation in terms of the scientific disciplines involved.

State of the art. Insights from the FG sessions showed a broad diversity among the participants in analysing the current state of the art in the HE research field with respect to the existence of specific theories and methodologies used in HE research.

Even more, the community appears to be split into two more or less opposite groups. One sees the HE research field as a community of individuals who are coming from various disciplines with the goal of analysing and clarifying certain issues related to HE from various angles using various sets of theories and methodologies. The other group is formed among those who are actually exclusively devoted to the analysis of topics related to HE. Regardless of the notion of whether it is fundamental or applicative research, this 'small HE sub-community' is self-perceived to be a certain 'mainstream' inside the HE field, with individuals who might be seen as 'gatekeepers' (Hong Kong, FG2). Nevertheless, FGPs acknowledged that there are different valuable contributions in the same field on the same topic by people from different academic disciplines and areas, who in reality very rarely speak to each other:

I think... we are a field of research more than a discipline. If there is a discipline, it's based on epistemic tradition. And we in higher education, we don't have one epistemic tradition, we have many. (Finland, FG2)

This statement is supported by another FGP who highlighted difficulties in finding special education (and HE) theories developed in the field of pedagogy, except for ones that emerge from the analysis of the teaching methods and learning process. While FGPs agreed that there is no theory specific to the HE field, several theoretically possible alternative strategies were noted in a debate: 1) building theories from scratch by using grounded theory approaches; 2) borrowing theories from other disciplines while grouping them (revealing what kind of theories we use in HE studies and seeing what that means in terms of the way we interpret different aspects of HE); and 3) mapping the theoretical framework and concepts used in the HE field as a starting point for further work on synthesis in the HE field.

Interdisciplinarity. FGP debates show additional division in the HE community with respect to understanding the relationship between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity in HE research. Some FGPs are very open to tight collaboration with individuals coming from a broad range of social sciences (understood as interdisciplinarity), believing that it is a good alternative. Nevertheless, problems were acknowledged when looking at interdisciplinarity in practice, as projects may be declared to be only interdisciplinary but are in fact multidisciplinary; contributions to the same topic are offered by people from different disciplines.

FGPs acknowledged both weaknesses and strengths in the multidisciplinary of the HE research field. They argued that multidisciplinary contributes to the fragmentation of HE research, as it borrows theories from many disciplines, particularly psychology, sociology, economics and political science. Multidisciplinary also results in tensions between disciplinary approaches (e.g. between approaches to the same phenomena from economists, sociologists or anthropologists). In contrast, multidisciplinary was also linked to the strength and ability of the HE field to adapt to new topics quite quickly.

Individual approaches. The debate was not only about disciplines. The important role of individuals in the HE field was stressed in two ways. First, some FGPs confirmed that they are more eager to build own individual interconnections with a broad scientific community that covers all research disciplines (multidisciplinary). Second, the critical role of individual (world) scholars with a base in a particular social science discipline was recognised as a huge advance in the HE field while bringing together people who are coming from traditional academic disciplines.

The methods issue

This issue appeared in the FGP debate as very critical. It was pointed out both when debating academics' and practitioners' work in the HE field. In a

more focused academic debate, the FGPs agreed that it should be an object of study along with the research question that determines research methods and techniques to be used.

What is often missing in research is the revelation of real-life situations and processes. This is why FGPs accepted a note from an FGP, an anthropologist, who stressed *'the need to have some ground-level data to figure out... the really right questions to ask'* (USA, FG2). Indeed, multiple and various kinds of research methods were embraced, such as bottom-up, inductive research about lived experiences in the real world, e.g. the lived experience of students and faculty members influenced by technological, financial and ideological aspects and the fact that people are moving around the world (e.g. based on ethnographic research, as is typical for anthropology). Also, other qualitative research methods were embraced together with historical research methods and sophisticated quantitative methods and mixed methods. FGPs agreed that the multimethod approach is needed to help grasp the researched phenomena by acknowledging the general picture and achieving a deep understanding of the phenomena.

In this context, severe criticism was focused on analysis methods used by practitioners. It has been revealed that practitioners' work has too often been below professional standards.

Fluid identity

According to FGPs, disciplinarity remains the critical issue in the field of HE despite attempts at interdisciplinarity (e.g. a consortium of big projects that analyse specific aspects of HE systems and HE policies in a large number of countries, international research teams that are gathered for a specific topic, etc.). More precisely, as FGP discussions showed, there is a rather small core of the HE community which has evolved and is able to understand researchers who come from other disciplinary traditions, as illustrated by this statement:

We have a certain number of core connects that we all share... So we tend to understand their disciplinary approach and how it is related to HE research. (Finland, FG2)

But is there an identity common to academics (and practitioners) directly linked to the HE field? FGPs revealed several challenges in forming of such an identity. They point to fluidity in many terms, such as the following:

- study programmes from which academics are recruited (e.g. from sociology, economy, history, philosophy, international relations);
- practices of academic positioning (academic tenure appointments in HE

field based on disciplinary-determined positions, such as political science, public policy, etc.);

- publishing fluidity, particularly in discontinuities of publishing research on HE phenomena (most researchers are not dedicated to the field and do not publish constantly in the HE field);
- attending conferences that are disciplinary based and different conferences focused on the HE field;
- hybrid identity, typical for the HE field (researchers in the HE field having several identities at the same time – identity related to particular academic discipline and identity of a HE researcher – without seeing that as a problem at the individual level).

Lack of discussion and synthesis: the role of journals, professional associations and conferences

The critical lack of discussion and synthesis in the HE research field was very much stressed in the FGP debate. FGPs broadly agreed that the lack of communication between various groups of researchers and practitioners is a crucial issue inside the field of HE, as it prevents a synthesis of this very fragmented field. Journals, professional associations and conferences were shown to contribute to such developments.

In the case of journals, it was noted that their role is at least to some extent determined by a search for an identity for the HE field and its borders. As the field is challenged by the fact that ‘many people are interested in the topic of HE’, journal editors play important roles in this context. Indeed, journal editors participating in FG debates openly note that they act as gatekeepers by enforcing a certain conditionality in accepting articles for publication in HE journals. In particular, the condition to ‘cite the right literature’ is applied to address the legitimacy of the HE field. However, this hegemonic approach was criticised by other FGPs for, among other reasons, following a global trend of pressure on researchers to publish ‘for points’ and for applying additional pressure on authors to follow certain hegemonic scopes, approaches and methodologies preferred by certain journals. This was found to be ‘catastrophic for science’ (Slovenia, FG1).

Furthermore, FGPs recognised that there were conferences organised in the past by professional associations bringing together different disciplines contributing to the HE field. However, recently they noticed a trend of conferences contributing to the closing of a debate within narrow circles. According to FGP insights, only one or two disciplines usually come together, or conferences only bring together certain practitioners. The quality of presentations (particularly from the methodological point of view) has been found to be increasingly questionable. Several FGPs reported that

they tend to solve these issues by avoiding certain conferences in the HE field and by combining attendance at only a selection of conferences both inside and outside the HE field.

The responsibility of academics and practitioners

FGPs did not exclusively recognise a division between academics and practitioners in the HE field. They also exposed the split between the research ON policy and FOR policy (basic vs applied research). One the one hand, FGPs believe that academic research is no ivory tower, but rather, as one FGP illustrated *'a platform that needs to connect to society'* (England-UK, FG2). On the other hand, FGPs criticised the focusing on a narrow problem in research since, as one FGP put it, *'the problem-driven approaches that we use to research in this field do not allow us to understand the changes in broader terms'* (Mexico, FG1).

The question of how to solve the tensions that arise from conceiving higher education as an academic research field and as an endeavour contributing to improved problem-solving was found to be critical for the field. Similarly, the questions of what the benefits are of having insider knowledge of the social phenomena being studied and how can you appropriately distance yourself from the studied social phenomena remain on the agenda.

Indeed, FGPs criticised practices of both the research 'for' and 'on' policy. They did not accept the thesis that academic research is superior to applied research. On the contrary, the joint conclusion was that the only legitimate distinction between the types of research is that of good and bad research.

Critical theoretical and conceptual issues were pointed out with a reference to Macfarlane's archipelago (2012), such as a need to search for some general concept which would integrate fragments (islands) of the HE field, looking beyond the separate fields of thinking (islands) and looking at the bigger picture as well as the revelation of a wider context, a world around 'the archipelago'. FGPs also raised the question of why critical science is not having an impact. Several potential answers were offered. The challenges regarding the essential roles of universities, particularly regarding the critical position against the object of research, stood out, as was clearly pointed by an FGP from Slovenia: *'We are apologists, we are not creative critical thinkers'* (Slovenia, FG1). When looking at the whole HE field, the presence of two extremes were found inappropriate - the reflective approach of practitioners and very narrow disciplinary approaches.

The issues of both academics' and practitioners' responsibilities as actors in the HE field were not avoided. FGPs expect that both clusters of HE actors act responsibly in finding alternatives to the current developments, in connecting independent research data and analysis with the policymaking

process, in developing alternatives to the ways of doing research and performing other academic activities so as to achieve/maintain appropriate professional standards in both academia and in directly policy-focused efforts.

Suggestions for solving the issues of the he field

The FGPs agreed on several imperatives:

- The acknowledgement that the HE field has been developing in the context of changing internationalisation and globalisation trends. As there is no single process of internationalisation or globalisation, internationalisation is neither a linear expanding process nor the same at the centre and on the periphery.
- It needs to be critically acknowledged that favouring the English North American point of view is obvious in the HE academics' and practitioners' communities and in the key concepts that dominate the HE field.
- One of the greatest challenges facing researchers in HE is to look at HE from outside HE and to take account of the dynamics of change on both the inside and outside.
- There is a need for more communication and cooperation among scholars and practitioners in the HE field.

Furthermore, FGPs acknowledged several main specific tasks that need to be fulfilled in the HE field, as follows:

1. Analyse the *state of the art* in the HE field, starting with the categorisation of the issues on which HE researchers are focused, followed by categorisation according to disciplines and concepts. This could be built on rigorous analysis (e.g. analysis of journals) and building typologies according to several aspects, such as the following: What do researchers do? What issues do they analyse? Which methodologies are used? Can we see regional, country and institutional differences? Can we see North-South cleavages? etc.
2. Map the HE field based on the analysis of citations and other elements of bibliometrics.
3. Analyse continuities and discontinuities in developments in the HE field, such as innovations, trends and the cross-country relevance of case study research.
4. Reveal what the international community of HE researchers needs to understand better while taking into account the context (national, social, institutional) of the HE phenomena.

Among the suggested approaches and strategies for making progress in the HE field, the following stand out:

1. Promotion of diverse approaches in scientific work
2. Promotion of the development of knowledge as a sum of the knowledge of all five global continents
3. Inclusion of ideas which go beyond Western hegemony into courses for students so that students will be aware of the contextual diversity
4. Organisation of conferences of distinct and various types (involving various selections of disciplines, academics and practitioners) while increasing the quality of research and the quality of debate in the field
5. Organisation of HE symposiums which will bring together the HE community, teaching and learning, policy and governance, also including people from the government.

Conclusions

(1) The first research question addressed in this article was “Are the *state of the art* of the HE field generally and the relationships between academics and practitioners in the HE field in particular perceived in the same way by HE academics and practitioners from different parts of the world?”. Based on the presented focus group discussions, the answer is not simply black-and-white. What appears to be critical is experts’ experiences of working as either academics or practitioners in various contexts around the globe. The real-life experiences of western experts in non-western contexts have made them sensitive to global variations and the western-biased transfer of HE knowledge and policies, as well as research agendas to other parts of the world, viewing the recipients of these as objects rather than subjects in the process of international exchange. Academics have also been building on their international experiences but tended to focus more on critical thinking about the current characteristics of the HE field, as well as the need to grasp the ongoing changes related to (de)globalisation. In addition, they wanted to reveal and take account of the variety of contexts and the HE phenomena in the current world, while noting the dynamics in changes and the emergence of certain new phenomena. In a way, a considerable number of FG participants – among both practitioners and academics – expressed the need for more holistic and inclusive academic and practitioner practices in terms of contributions from different parts of the world. Last but not least, the FGPs themselves revealed that what actually occurs in real life in the HE field depends on the following: 1) the part of the globe; 2) the research focus (discourse only, or also other focuses); and 3) the level of analysis (macro, meso, micro) on which the HE phenomena are being viewed.

(2) The second research question asked whether insights coming from non-Western parts of the world can add a new quality to academic and practitioner knowledge and practice in the HE field. While the findings speak strongly in favour of this thesis, this positive assessment also includes several critical issues. Among them are: 1) the position and prerequisites for the development of HE knowledge in the current periphery, which is now more in a position to translate and 'catch up' with the western-centred knowledge; 2) the alternative of creating paradigmatic developments in the HE field while we are facing de-globalisation processes and growing global inequalities; 3) the development of strategies by academics and practitioners from non-western parts of the world for making contributions to currently western-biased debates and to the further development of the HE field.

(3) In the article, we also explored whether the perceptions of the focus group participants from different parts of the world differ relative to the *state of the art* of the HE field generally and the relationships between academics and practitioners in the HE field in particular. In relation to the distinction between academics and practitioners in terms of making a difference between knowledge producers and policymakers (as suggested by Caplan, 1979), we cannot say the FGPs made it very clear. What was explicitly exposed by both the academic and practitioner participants was the subordination of the HE field to various forms of government – researchers being subordinated to government interests, researchers working as international actors generally closely linked to intergovernmental organisations dominated by government interests of developed countries, or practitioners analysing selected aspects of the HE field. Nevertheless, some implicit tensions between the academics' and practitioners' points of view are obvious. The key tensions appear to be linked to the academics' demands for critical thinking, rigorous methodology, independence from government in terms of agendas, policies and actual research process, the need to take account of the bigger picture of HE phenomena and a dynamic view on societies, the world and the HE field. The academics tended to think very similarly regardless of the part of the world they came from. All in all, the HE field appears to be an area field of multiple (sub)worlds, which – according to the FG participants – must communicate among themselves much more, and in different ways than today if we are to ensure the HE field's successful development.

(4) As is typical in FG research, the FGPs offered valuable but not generalisable insights that encourage the development of large-scale research designed specifically for generalisations (Krugger, 1998: 69). What deserves special attention is an array of consensual suggestions for solving the burning issues of the HE field (presented in detail in previous sections). Also,

as in other fields (e.g. Reddin, 2021), it may be worthwhile to reveal both what academics can teach practitioners and what practitioners can teach academics. We hope that the presented findings will encourage cross-disciplinary and perhaps also interdisciplinary critical academic research on the relationship between academics and practitioners that takes account of the dynamic social, economic, technological and political changes in the world.

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