THE STATE OF THE ART OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH ON FLANDERS

Bruno Broucker, Jeroen Huisman, Jef C. Verhoeven
and Kurt De Wit

ABSTRACT

Higher education systems of small(er) countries may be less attractive to investigate, and it is likely that only a small indigenous research community is interested in and capable of researching such small systems. In this chapter, we map which studies have been carried out at the meso- and macro-levels of the Flemish higher education system since the early 2000s. It allows us to discover gaps in our understanding of that particular system. We conclude that it would be beneficial for all stakeholders involved (researchers, policy-makers, institutional management) to try to align their research and practical interests and develop a research agenda that fits these interests.

Keywords: Higher education research; Flanders; system governance; programme supply; internationalisation; management; quality assurance; funding

INTRODUCTION

In his analysis of journals focusing on higher education, Tight (2017) describes the growth of research on higher education. The conclusion that ‘[w]e would be on safe ground [...] to claim that higher education is fast becoming a well-researched field’ is warranted. Along similar lines, Rumbley et al. (2014) see a growth in programmes, centres and journals dedicated to the study of higher education. Both publications, however, qualify the claim of growth, by stating

that not every aspect of the higher education fabric is equally paid attention to. As in other fields, topics of interest to researchers (and policymakers and practitioners) wax and wane.

It is equally important to echo Rumbley et al.'s (2014) warning that in some countries there are clear gaps in the capacity, scope and size of research on higher education. Horta and Jung (2014) conclude, on the basis of their analysis of Asian higher education publications, that researchers are unequally distributed across Asian countries and higher education institutions. Jones (2012) analyses the developments in Canada and concludes that the country is in need of a strategic approach to higher education research, including (national) data management, the sharing and dissemination of research findings and strengthening research capacity at graduate levels. Forsberg and Geschwind (2016) carried out an analysis of almost 400 Swedish doctoral dissertations (2000–2013), noting that much research is carried out at the micro-level of teaching and learning practices, and plea for more attention to the meso- and macro-levels, the interplay between levels and a greater variety of methods.

Given the increasing attention to stock-taking exercises in our field (see, e.g., Macfarlane & Grant, 2012 or Tight, 2018), we thought it is of importance to map research in a smaller research community. We focus – given our background – on research on the Flemish higher education system. Admitting that ‘relevance’ has normative connotations – who decides what is relevant? – we think it is important to make researchers, policymakers and practitioners aware of the gaps in our understanding of Flemish higher education and to explore possible avenues for future research. For an international audience, the case of Flanders is interesting because it has been a forerunner in the Bologna Process and it has followed the early adopters of New Public Management (NPM). Given the rather swift introduction of higher education policy reforms in Flanders, the question arises to what extent the effects of the reforms are also investigated? We want to address what the level of research on higher education in Flanders is, and whether that research is following the pace of Flanders’ general proactive position regarding higher education policy.

THE FLEMISH HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM

In many respects, the Flemish higher education system is comparable to any other Western European system (see, e.g., comparative studies by Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, 2006; Neave & Van Vught, 1991; Taylor, Ferreira, Machado, & Santiago, 2008). It has a binary system, consisting of 6 universities and 13 university colleges. In terms of quality, the system is perceived to be of considerable high quality (see Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (De Wit, 2018; OECD, 2016)). The system is primarily publicly funded. Private institutions can request to be accredited, but the system overall is rather closed for new providers (Broucker & De Wit, 2013).

In terms of policy developments, Flanders has followed trends across Europe and sometimes has been a frontrunner. To mention a few of these developments: mergers in the university college sector in the 1990s, the implementation of a

1 national quality assurance system, implementation of features of New Public
3 Management, including performance measurement (see Broucker, De Wit, &
Leisyte, 2016), and the introduction of a bachelor–master structure and other
elements of the European Higher Education Area.

5 What makes Flanders somewhat distinctive is that it is actually a region of a
country (Belgium), but with substantive autonomy in educational affairs. It is a
7 relatively young higher education system, given the rather recent regionalisation
and decentralisation processes (1989). Flanders is a small but densely populated
9 community in Europe with around 6.5 million inhabitants.

Another distinctive feature with respect to higher education is the setting up
11 of associations between universities and university colleges. The associations,
established in 2003, were meant to support closer cooperation between the two
13 sectors, particularly with respect to the so-called two-cycle programmes offered
by the university colleges, but transferred to the university sector in 2012
15 (Huisman & Mampaey, 2017). Likewise, there seems to be some more concern
in Flanders (and also in the Netherlands) than in other European countries with
17 respect to an efficient supply of study programmes. Finally, private providers
have not really set foot on the ground (yet) in Flanders. The funding system was
19 thoroughly adapted relatively recently (2008).

The choice of a somewhat smaller community inevitably will lead to the con-
21 clusion that certain themes have not been researched. Verhoeven (2002) already
reported – on the basis of bibliographic research during 1989–1999 – that in
23 the field of education there was limited attention to research on higher educa-
tion. Not surprisingly, there is only a small community involved in research
25 activities, with only a few ‘discipline-based continuous higher education
researchers’ (Teichler, 2000), including one of the authors of this chapter. As a
27 consequence, there may be limited use of a wide variety of available research
methods, conceptual approaches and theories. However, this does not take away
29 the relevance of the question to explore the gaps and whether this should be
seen as problematic.

METHODOLOGY

33 We used well-known search engines in order to obtain a representative collection
35 of research about higher education policy in Flanders. We looked systematically
at publications from 2003 to 2017 in the Web of Science (WoS) and Google
37 Scholar. We also included a few publications from 2000 to 2002 because of their
great informative value and because they point to the continuity of topics or
39 methods in the research carried out over the years.

A large number of keywords were used. We have always included the words
41 ‘higher education’ and ‘Flanders’ and/or ‘Belgium’, in connection with a large
variety of concepts linked with higher education. Some examples are higher edu-
43 cation policy, university management, university governance, policy evaluation,
funding, administration, management, governance, staff, professor and student.
45 Next to WoS and Google Scholar, we also checked publications of agencies sup-
porting education research in Flanders (for instance, Fund for Education Policy

and Practice-Oriented Scientific Research – OBPWO), and references mentioned in the collected publications. Nevertheless, not all publications about higher education mentioning Flemish higher education were included. Only when it (or a part of the system) was the actual topic of research and analysis (and not merely an illustration in an international comparison) was the document included in the analysis.

In that way, we came to 12 distinct micro-, meso- and macro-level themes. In this chapter, we focus on meso- and macro-level themes, so we did not look in depth at (using Tight’s (2012) typology) teaching and learning and course design, but focused on higher education policy, governance of higher education institutions, funding, programme supply, internationalisation and quality assurance. Neither did we look at developments in the adjacent fields of research policy and science, technology and innovation.

In Table 1, we classify the 52 documents we found in three ways. First, we give information about the funding of the research. Column POF includes publications about research funded by a Flemish policy-oriented funding agency (for instance, the Ministry of Education or the aforementioned OBPWO) and column FRF research supported by a Flemish agency for basic/fundamental research (for instance, the Research Foundation FWO, or PhD projects). For foreign funding institutions, we use the same categories with an adapted label: PONF for a foreign policy-oriented agency and FRNF for a foreign organisation supporting basic/fundamental research. If the documents did not offer information about a funding organisation, the label U (unknown) was used. Second, we offer information about the audience: did the authors publish mainly for local readers (in Dutch) or did they focus on an international audience (in English)? And third, did they publish in journals quoted in WoS? Note that Table 1 mentions 53 documents, because one document covered two research themes.

We retrieved information about the funding institutions for 55% of the documents and we see that 17 of these were supported by Flemish institutions and 12 by foreign institutions. In spite of the small size of Flemish higher education, a

Table 1. Publications by Theme, Funding Agency, Language and WoS (2000–2017).

		Flemish Agency		Foreign Agency		U	Total	Eng	Dutch	WoS
		POF	FRF	PONF	FRNF					
	System governance	2		1	1	7	11	6	5	–
	Management	3	5	–	5	5	18	16	2	5
	Funding	–	2	–	1	–	3	3	–	3
	Programme supply	–	2	–	1	1	4	4	–	4
	Quality assurance	–	–	–	–	5	5	5	–	–
	Internationalisation	1	2	1	2	6	12	9	3	6
	Total	6	11	2	10	24	53	43	10	18

1 large proportion of the documents are meant for an international audience.
Nevertheless, only 34% of the publications are quoted in the Social Sciences
3 Citation Index.

Please note there is additional research on Flanders. We may have missed the
5 odd publication, and governmental agencies as well as higher education institu-
tions perform analyses themselves, while buffer organisations publish reports
7 and policy statements that sometimes include their analysis of the situation in
Flemish higher education. Most of these publications are however not in the
9 public domain, and it must be acknowledged that the research they use or carry
out to support their claim may not be as neutral as we can expect from academic
11 analysts.

We will describe for the six themes what the actual topics of research were,
13 how (research methods) the research was done and what the key findings were.

15 **THEME 1: SYSTEM GOVERNANCE**

17 Within this theme, we found 11 publications. Like many other higher education
systems, the Flemish system witnessed a change from state-steering towards gov-
19 ernment ‘stepping back’ and stimulating ‘decentralisation’. The laws of 1991
(universities) and 1994 (university colleges) granted more autonomy to higher
21 education institutions. As part of a large comparative EU Fifth Framework –
funded research project on the role of the nation-state in the national economies,
23 De Wit and Verhoeven (2004) focused on quality assurance. Using conceptual-
isations offered in the higher education literature (see Neave & Van Vught, 1991,
25 on state control versus state supervision), and also the steering models of Olsen
(first reported by Van Heffen, Maassen, Verhoeven, De Vijlder, & De Wit,
27 1999), the authors noted a discrepancy between what the government wanted
and what the higher education institutions actually did. Based on document ana-
29 lysis, they concluded ‘that the model of the ‘market state’ or the ‘evaluative
state’ is only realised partially in Flanders. The government is still intervention-
31 ist when it comes to key policy issues’ (p. 1). This claim is in line with earlier
work of Verhoeven and Elchardus (2000).

33 Broucker and De Wit (2013) used conceptual notions from the NPM litera-
ture and refer to not only core public policy and **public management** scholars
35 (e.g., Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017), but also rely on works of higher education
scholars who have analysed NPM developments in higher education. They
37 described how policymakers, confronted with an application of private providers
of higher education to become recognised providers of higher education, inter-
39 preted the principles of NPM, liberalisation and privatisation. The study used
document analysis and interviews, and the article came to the conclusion that
41 ‘[p]rivate actors still have to move within a framework that is highly conditional
and that a closed higher education system can largely remain untouched by a
43 clear-cut, well-defined “intrusion” in the system’ (p. 522).

Broucker et al. (2016) labelled Flanders – based on document analyses – as
45 a mid-adopter of NPM. The system is still strongly state-regulated. There is no
real free market; it is regulated by the government. In the current funding

1 system, the output of the higher education institutions determines the resources
 they receive from the state (see also the section on ‘Funding’). Higher education
 3 institutions are rather free to use the lump sum received from the government.
 Teaching methods, curriculum, research and appointments are in the hands of
 5 the institutions, although the government is steering to a certain extent by deter-
 mining the proportion of funding based on awarded PhDs, publications and
 7 citations.

Large-scale reforms have been investigated in the 1990s and the beginning of
 9 the 2000s. Noteworthy is the research on the university colleges after the merger
 operations, carried out with financial support from OBPWO (Verhoeven,
 11 Devos, Smolders, Cools, & Velghe, 2002). The authors used insights from
 organisational theory (resource dependency and new institutional theory), and
 13 made use of surveys and case studies to analyse the post-merger situation. Also
 the development and implementation of associations between universities and
 15 university colleges (Verhoeven, 2005, 2008, 2010b; Huisman & Mampaey,
 2017), and how research is embedded in the university colleges sector
 17 (Verhoeven, 2010b) should be mentioned as an important policy topic that has
 been assessed critically. Verhoeven assessed the situation and developments on
 19 the basis of a critical analysis. Huisman and Mampaey used a policy design and
 implementation framework from the public administration literature for their
 21 analysis based on document analysis and interviews with experts. Their case
 study was part of a multicountry EC commissioned and funded project on
 23 reform in higher education.

25 **THEME 2: PROGRAMME SUPPLY**

27 The topic of programme supply is interesting, despite a limited number of stud-
 ies (three), given the rather unusual governmental concern about an efficient
 29 supply of programmes. Unusual, for research (e.g., Huisman, Beerkens, &
 Goedegebuure, 2003; Jongbloed et al., 2012), suggests that although govern-
 31 ments do regulate the supply of programmes in many higher education systems
 (see also Estermann, Nokkala, & Steinel, 2011) in terms of access to, accredi-
 33 tation and funding of the programmes, few governments – the Flemish and
 Dutch being exceptions – are concerned about macro-level efficiency. Huisman,
 35 Verhoeven, and De Wit (2004), in an article emerging from the above-
 mentioned EU-funded Fifth Framework project, analysed how two Flemish and
 37 two Dutch universities developed their programme supply over the years in light
 of the prevailing governmental policies. These policies have been guiding not
 39 only the universities, but also external and historical contexts (in Flanders, par-
 ticularly the fact that two large research universities dominate the field; in the
 41 Netherlands, previous experiences with cutbacks in the programme supply in the
 1980s) played a role in the universities’ strategies.

43 A couple of years later, the programme supply in Flanders was analysed
 from an economic perspective. Kelchtermans and Verboven (2008), using simu-
 45 lation models, are rather sceptical about the possibility to cut the costs of higher
 education by limiting the programme supply, particularly reducing the

1 duplication of programmes. They warn that the governmental policy could have
3 as a consequence that participation of students in higher education could diminish
5 because of low student mobility. Students apparently prefer to stay relatively
close to their parental homes when they take up their studies and limiting the
supply would then be detrimental.

On a related theme, Slantcheva-Durst (2014) investigated, through document
analysis, interviews, focus groups and institutional visits, the diffusion of short-
cycle higher education in Flanders and the Netherlands. The author applied a
qualitative case study design and highlighted the role of national (e.g., the
Flemish Association of University Colleges, VLHORA) and supra-national
communication networks (e.g., the European Association for Universities of
Applied Sciences, EURASHE) that supported the dissemination of the
innovation.

THEME 3: INTERNATIONALISATION

We found 12 papers on internationalisation. Universities have always had
foreign contacts, but during the last two decades, the Flemish higher education
policy and the higher education institutions have intensified international co-
operation more than before. Rakic (2001) asked the question whether the EU
has contributed to the convergence of the higher education policy in the
Netherlands, Flanders and Germany. Based on desk research, he observed con-
vergences in the national policies, but rather as a consequence of 'institutional
isomorphism' than because of an impact of the EU.

But there are other international organisations that play a role. Based on
interviews with key informants and desk research, Verhoeven, Kelchtermans,
and Michielsen (2005) stated that two organisations played an important role in
Flemish higher education policy: the OECD and the EU. Moreover, the process
of internationalisation is not only the result of political decision-makers, but
also of higher education institutions' managers, lecturers and students. Based on
in-depth interviews, the authors report on the opinions of these three groups in
Flemish higher education institutions. Internationalisation was differently con-
ceptualised: (1) in universities and university colleges; (2) between top managers
of higher education institutions and lecturers; and (3) between fields of study
(medical schools and faculties for engineering prefer international contacts with
top universities).

The strongest impetus for internationalisation came from the Bologna
Process. The original six aims of the Bologna Declaration (1999) were expanded
at different moments with other action lines. How this process developed in
Flanders has many times been described (Dittrich, Frederiks, & Luwel, 2004;
Verhesschen & De Wit, 2008; Verhesschen & Verburgh, 2006; Verhoeven et al.
2005). Nevertheless, De Wit (2008) does not stop at the influence of the Bologna
Process on higher education, noticing that globalisation and Europeanisation
became important developments in our society, and wondering whether these
processes make universities look more and more similar. He warns against too
hasty conclusions, based on four case studies (two Dutch and two Flemish

universities), but decides that globalisation and Europeanisation do not make universities in Belgium and the Netherlands look alike.

Aerden, De Decker, Divis, Frederiks, and De Wit (2013) considered internationalisation as a very important target of higher education, but they doubt whether the instruments at that time to assess the internationalisation process are fit for this task. Based on 21 pilot studies (including four Flemish higher education institutions), they came to propose a new method for measuring the quality of internationalisation in higher education institutions. Voegtle, Knill, and Dobbins (2011) ask whether the BP had also impacted on policies of non-participants of the Bologna Process. Based on a comparative study of 21 OECD countries (including Flanders), they conclude the Bologna Process had also some influence on the policies in non-member states.

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Recently, Broucker and De Wit (2016) examined to what extent Flanders had attained the Bologna targets concerning quality assurance, the two-cycle structure and mobility. They conclude that the main targets have been attained, but that for some details there is still work to do. In spite of this positive assessment of the influence of European developments, Vukasovic and Huisman (2017) are more critical. Based on policy analysis in four countries they concluded that European policies ‘primarily serve as legitimizing labels for pre-existing policy preferences, thus leading to convergence of policy rhetoric and ideas, while allowing for significant diversity of policy instruments and outcomes’.

Lipnicka (2015, 2016) showed, informed by six case studies about the introduction of the Bologna principles in three countries, that its realisation is dependent on the history of higher education, the formal system, quality assurance in an international environment, funding, student numbers and faculty.

THEME 4: MANAGEMENT

The topic of management is rather difficult to isolate as it merely has been treated as a transversal topic within Flemish higher education research, and generally not studied in depth on its own. We found 18 publications. Research on the central management and leadership of higher education institutions in Flanders is limited, and much is descriptive—comparative in nature (see, e.g., De Boer, 2014). Since the introduction of the new funding system of 2008 and the integration of the academic programmes of the university colleges in the universities, research on the management of the university colleges is absent, and despite merging processes, there is hardly any research available on the impact on management. This is surprising, as legal changes had an important impact on higher education institutions (implementation of the bachelor—master structure in 2004, funding reform in 2008, transfer of academic programmes from university colleges to universities in 2013).

Within the framework of those policy reforms, Verhoeven (2010b) stated that the introduction of the associations could be seen as a start for giving more room for scientific research in university colleges, although other research has shown that university colleges were well behind universities and that they

1 certainly did not have (at the moment of the field work) the financial means to
attain the level of the universities. In 2017, a special issue of *Higher Education*
3 *Quarterly* was published with other researchers: an overview of the governance
structure of eight European ‘flagship universities’ (one Flemish university is
5 included). Reform agendas have changed the intra-university governance struc-
tures. According to Maassen (2017), this created a paradox: ‘the more university
7 leaders take on and operate in line with the reform agenda’s ideologies, the less
effective they appear to be in realising some of the reform intentions’ (p. 290).

9 On a general level, there has been some research conducted regarding the
diversity of higher education systems. Huisman, Lepori, Seeber, Frølich, and
11 Scordato (2015) concluded that Flanders has a very diverse higher education
system, but this diversity is the result of some outliers in the system (see also
13 Huisman, Meek, & Wood, 2007). In 2010, De Wit investigated the impact of
globalisation on universities. The conclusion is that globalisation does not lead
15 to more uniformity, but that **input items** on the agenda such as the degree in
which the university has to act like a business, how much it must emphasise out-
17 put and how firmly the policy leaders have to control the internal processes.
Despite this agenda setting, higher education institutions interpret these elements
19 differently, depending on their situation, hence creating diversity (see also De
Wit, 2008). Two other studies (Mampaey, 2016; Mampaey, Huisman, & Seeber,
21 2015) focused on strategies of Flemish higher education institutions.

Despite the limited amount of higher education research on management
23 itself, generally speaking, the management of higher education institutions in
Flanders is characterised by a balance of managerialism and collegial govern-
25 ance. Most research attempts to understand the level of both within higher edu-
cation institutions. Regarding elements of *managerialism*, it is observed, first,
27 that after the formal mergers of the UCs, they did not decentralise all their ser-
vices, and department heads became important managers (Verhoeven & Devos,
29 2002). Second, in 2008, Verhoeven described the transition of university colleges
and the consequences for the relationship between university colleges and uni-
31 versities. The governance of the university colleges is in the hands of a governing
board and a general manager who, though higher education could act rather
33 autonomously, works in collaboration with board and department heads. Third,
while elements of managerialism seem to be present in the Flemish higher educa-
35 tion institutions, Verhoeven (2010a) demonstrated – based on findings from a
survey – that, in general, managerialism is not present in universities in its
37 extreme forms. A relatively large group of middle managers still prefers a colle-
gial attitude, and they criticise to a certain extent managerialism.

39 In line with this, research has been conducted regarding the level of adminis-
trative burden (Dewaele, De Rynck, Wayenberg, & Decramer, 2013). Through
41 focus groups, the researchers conclude that lecturers have the feeling that admin-
istrative duties and pressure of work are growing and that there is a tendency to
43 transform every problem into a lawsuit. Another topic studied – through a
survey – within the context of managerialism is that of Decramer, Smolders,
45 and Vanderstraeten (2013) regarding the attitude of academics of a Flemish pub-
lic university towards performance management systems: ‘the estimation results

show that a higher level of internally consistent employee performance management systems, more communication and tighter control are associated with higher academic employee performance management satisfaction' (p. 352). Based on a comparative study of some departments in five of the universities of the same project, Stensaker and Fumasoli (2017) described the links between institutional and sub-level strategies. This offers a complex picture of strategies for the co-ordination of the sub-units of a university and the governance structure of the university.

Regarding elements of *collegial governance*, there is a general trend throughout the research findings that governance in Flemish higher education institutions is seen as mainly collegial (see, for instance, Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, & Arnal, 2008), despite historical structural reforms (such as processes of mergers) that could have had a significant impact on management. The Centre for Sociology of Education (KU Leuven) and Vlerick Leuven Gent published extensively about the governance and management of university colleges (Verhoeven & Devos, 2002). They shed light on the experience of all members of all boards of university colleges (methods: in-depth interviews and a survey), and, using the same methods, on the process of merger of university colleges. These studies show a picture of the situation in university colleges before the start of the associations in 2003. Based on six case studies of universities and university colleges, De Wit and Verhoeven (2000) have shown that internal and external stakeholders of universities have a different impact on the institutional policy of universities and a different relationship with other stakeholders. Interestingly, in a more recent project, Mampaey and Huisman (2016) argue that higher education institutions keep weak network ties with stakeholders that do not share their values. The authors wonder what kind of defensive strategies an old established research university in Flanders develops in the mass media to answer criticism of stakeholders. A project by Aarrevaara, Wikström, and Maassen (2017) discusses the interference of some stakeholders in the departments of teacher education in three flagship universities (one is a Flemish university) and the reactions of the managers of these departments.

THEME 5: QUALITY ASSURANCE

We found five publications on quality assurance, most of which were desk research studies. The 1991 law on universities was also the beginning of a compulsory quality assurance system. This principle was later also accepted for the university colleges. Each university had to establish an internal and an external quality assurance system. The internal quality assurance system was the responsibility of each higher education institution, whereas the external quality assurance system was prescribed by the government. In 2005, the system was changed into an accreditation process, jointly organised by the Netherlands and Flanders in the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (Verhesschen, 2006). The aim of this policy was to establish a form of accountability and to stimulate quality improvement (Westerheijden, Hulpiau, & Waeytens, 2007).

1 In spite of the good intentions of the policymakers, Van Kemenade and
2 Hardjono (2010) conclude, based on a survey and Delphi research in university
3 colleges in the Flanders and the Netherlands, that self-evaluations (needed for
4 quality assurance and accreditation) are not reliable. Lecturers show a 'drama-
5 turgical compliance' with the expectations of the assessors. They conclude that
6 self-evaluations should not be part of compulsory external quality assurance,
7 but may be used for internal quality assurance.

8 Higher education managers complained about the high expenses for
9 the external quality assurance system, and lecturers were not happy with the
10 required additional work for writing self-evaluations. After many years, the
11 Flemish government became sensitive to these complaints. In 2015, the external
12 review of study programmes (programme review) was abolished and replaced by
13 an external review of the institutions of higher education (institutional review).
14 Quality control is now the full responsibility of the higher education institutions
15 themselves. They have to set up their own quality control system and an external
16 commission will evaluate that system, and not the individual programmes (De
17 Wit, 2017).

18 Although neither the Flemish government nor the universities consider the
19 popular university rankings (Times Higher Education World University
20 Ranking, QS World University Rankings, Academic Ranking of World
21 Universities) as a clear expression of the quality of education and research deliv-
22 ered by the universities, they are sensitive to them. All Flemish universities
23 belong to the 3% top higher education institutions in the world and all are eager
24 to deliver information needed to be assessed by the ranking organisations. De
25 Wit (2018) sees the ground for this good position in the presence of talented stu-
26 dents and faculty, the available resources for teaching and research, and the
27 favourable governance structure.

28 **THEME 6: FUNDING**

29 The funding of higher education, and the role of the government in this funding,
30 almost inevitably is an issue of debate in any country. In Flanders too, a reform
31 of the funding system has been at the forefront of higher education policy.
32 Following the Bologna Declaration, a restructuring of higher education took
33 place and flexible educational pathways were introduced. These reforms necessi-
34 tated an adaptation to the funding mechanisms. The former largely lump sum,
35 input-based mechanism was replaced in 2008 with a system based for the largest
36 part on output criteria. The main parameters in this new funding system are the
37 number of credits registered for by students, the number of credits they pass, the
38 number of degrees awarded and – for universities – research parameters (docto-
39 rates, publications, citations). Although the change from a funding system based
40 on input to one based on output seems to be an important turning point for
41 higher education, research on this change is scarce and does not offer an insight
42 into its implementation and effects. The published texts mostly limit themselves
43 to a discussion of the funding principles.

General funding principles are discussed by Kohtamäki and Lyytinen (2004), and Jongbloed (2011) and Jacobs and Van der Ploeg (2006) offer alternatives for current funding arrangements. Estermann, Pruvot, and Claeys-Kulik (2013) provide a description of the funding system in Flanders and confirm that Flemish universities are largely publicly funded, while contracts between higher education institutions and public authorities are absent. Apart from these international studies in which the funding system in Flanders is merely an example within a much broader framework (and therefore are not indexed in Table 1), only a few studies take the Flemish funding system as such as an object of analysis.

Kelchtermans and Verboven (2008) were rather sceptical about the possibility to cut the overall costs of higher education, based on a simulation study of administrative data on student and institution characteristics. The policy of reducing the programme diversity, on the one hand, and duplicating study programmes across institutions, on the other hand, could moreover have as a consequence that participation of students in higher education would diminish because it could impede student mobility.

Vandenbergh and Debande (2008, p. 384) concluded with regard to private investment in higher education 'that instruments of private finance, combining deferred and income-contingent payments, offer an opportunity to raise significant sums in order to (re)finance higher education in Europe without significantly eroding the profitability of the educational investment of individuals with heterogeneous lifetime incomes, and simultaneously addressing the risky nature of the investment'. They used the Panel Study on Belgian Households to estimate costs and incomes.

Cantillon, De Ridder, Vanhaecht, and Verbist (2011) used an analysis of administrative data on the success of first-year students to show that there is no proof for the belief of governments that output parameters as part of a funding system will stimulate universities to ameliorate their teaching efforts without having influence on the educational standards. They concluded that using output parameters can only work when student ability, student effort and teaching effort support each other, but that even then universities attracting more socially vulnerable students will enjoy fewer financial rewards than other universities.

Recent developments related to funding, such as the integration of the master degrees of the university colleges into the universities, have not yet been researched.

SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

In this chapter, we have provided an overview of macro- and meso-level higher education topics studied in or on Flanders. We stress again that we did not look at topics related to teaching and learning, course design and the student experience. With this, we have provided the state-of-the-art level of research on meso- and macro-aspects of higher education in a region that has been characterised as a forerunner in reforms and the adoption of the Bologna Declaration principles. We started the chapter with the question to what extent research has followed the pace of higher education policy. Based on our observations, we come to the following conclusions.

1 First, most research has a strong descriptive or explorative approach and
lacks an explanatory approach. We mainly observe an interest in general higher
3 education policy lines/trends, primarily in relation to quality, internationalisa-
tion and funding. To a large extent, these documents often study the policy in
5 itself, for example, how a certain policy came about, how it is operationalised
and what its impact is/might be. There is limited expertise on robust policy eval-
7 uations regarding higher education in Flanders (except maybe for the post-
merger studies early in the new millennium).

9 Second, there are some themes that are under-investigated. Limited knowl-
edge exists on the impact of fairly encompassing reforms, or on the factors that
11 explain how the higher education system works and achieves its results. Related
to this, there appear to be blind spots in the research, for example, a number of
13 higher education institutions within the Flemish community are systematically
ignored, the main focus being on the two largest research universities. The
15 exception is the article by Broucker and De Wit regarding Inno.com as a private
institution offering a specialised degree. Another blind spot is the internal func-
17 tioning of higher education institutions, the way they are managed, the internal
culture and organisational behaviour.

19 Third, an overwhelming majority of international publications use Flanders
as one of the cases in a comparative perspective. Thus, a very limited number of
21 publications use Flanders as the only case analysed. This is from an academic
perspective to some extent understandable (because the learning potential
23 increases after international comparison), but it also means that there is in the
international research community – overall – limited interest in the Flemish
25 higher education system *on its own*. From a more policy-oriented perspective,
this is striking, as Flanders has been a forerunner with respect to the Bologna
27 Process and has generally a very high reputation when it comes to the quality of
its higher education system – and thus can be of specific interest to researchers
29 in and outside Flanders.

31 Fourth, the themes emerging from the analysis are not that surprising. They
are within Flanders – as likely elsewhere – the most obvious and most dis-
33 cussed higher education policy topics. Yet, the overview also demonstrates some
interesting elements:

- 35 (1) Over time – that is, in the almost two decades we investigated – there have
37 not been fundamental changes in the topics addressed. Of course, the
research follows some changes in policy (and practice), but there seems to be
39 a constant pattern of the specific topics that are studied.
- 41 (2) The research topics in themselves are highly relevant, but because they are
treated rather separately, as is quite explicit when it comes to management,
43 taken together higher education research of the Flemish system provides a
rather fragmented picture.
- 45 (3) Because of the nature of many comparative research projects, there is lim-
ited attention to the role and impact of the specific higher education policy
and governance context in Flanders.

(4) The research on higher education is mostly internally oriented, which means that the topics addressed discuss more frequently internal aspects (funding, quality, governance) than external aspects. The impact of higher education in society in general, or the link between policy and external stakeholders, or the impact of external mechanisms (social, economic, political) on higher education policy, is not or rather superficially described.

Fifth, it appears that research on Flanders is to a fair extent dependent on the involvement of non-Flemish researchers (around 50% of the publications). Furthermore, the data suggest that many research projects could not have been carried out without the financial support of Flemish or European funding.

The final question we address here is what the earlier conclusions mean for higher education research in Flanders. Within Flanders, there seems to be a policy line to provide more research funding towards primary and secondary education policy (see also Verhoeven, Vandenberghe, & Doms, 2002) – as the needs for research might be bigger while the governmental capacity to perform research in these sectors on its own is probably lower. Although the reasons are justifiable, a concern must be raised. In Flanders, the pace of policy reform in higher education is quite high, and the question is what will happen if research is not following that pace. A particular concern is to what extent higher education policy will remain research-based or informed? If the effects of certain policies are under-investigated, the consequences – in the longer run – can be detrimental. This may be the case for the higher education institutions themselves, potentially insufficiently aware of further strategic positioning and improved management. There are also risks for the government, as higher education institutions are known for not necessarily following policy objectives and imperatives. We are tempted to recommend that more research on higher education should be carried out, but acknowledge that more research does not necessarily mean better outcomes. An important first step would however be to try to align the interests of policymakers, higher education leaders and managers and researchers to develop a research agenda that benefits all parties involved.

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