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Research question and relevance

In the context of globalisation, the Bologna Process aims at building an internationally competitive European Higher Education Area by moving towards greater convergence of higher education systems. Thereby, the Bologna Process sets the context for the internationalisation processes of universities across Europe. However, internationalisation remains a contested concept (Knight, 2021, p. 67), and the level of theory in higher education research, including on internationalisation, is still relatively low (Tight, 2020). This study conceptualises and operationalises internationalisation processes at universities based on a literature review to lay the foundation for a theoretically founded analysis of how internationalisation processes compare in the Netherlands and Germany. The operationalisation includes approaches on how to measure and compare internationalisation processes.

The present Dutch public debate expresses a growing critical sentiment on internationalisation and highlights that a shared understanding of the term has yet to be found. Contributing to the conceptualisation of internationalisation addresses this point and builds the basis for further operationalisation. The theoretical foundation of an institutional-level analysis of internationalisation processes sets it apart from widely used sociological institutionalist approaches (Cai & Mehari, 2015, p. 16/17) and from (commissioned) reports that often only describe the respective status quo. Moreover, the operationalisation of internationalisation processes at the institutional level for a comparative study differentiates it from the mainly national-level research and institutional-level single case studies.

Methodological approach

Pettigrew's framework for organisational change, as used by van den Hende, Whitsed, and Coelen (2022), conceptualises internationalisation as a change process covering "the content of change and its context and process" (Pettigrew, 1987, p. 650). This framework builds the point of departure, and each of the three elements – content, context and process – will be operationalised based on a literature review. The following approaches will be explored: employing the concept of isomorphism for the content, rationales behind internationalisation for the context, and Knight's internationalisation cycle combined with the concepts of institutional entrepreneurs and path dependency for the process. The operationalisation of internationalisation, which is proposed here, is part of a larger PhD project, in which data collection and analysis will follow at a later stage.

Expected results

This proposal is based on ongoing research, and findings will be presented at the conference. Initial insights on conceptualisations show different dimensions in defining internationalisation and point to a development towards more coordinated and systematic views. Preliminary findings on the operationalisation of internationalisation include a historical institutionalist perspective as the foundation, which fits the process-oriented view of internationalisation, and Pettigrew's framework of organisational change as a theoretical approach.

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