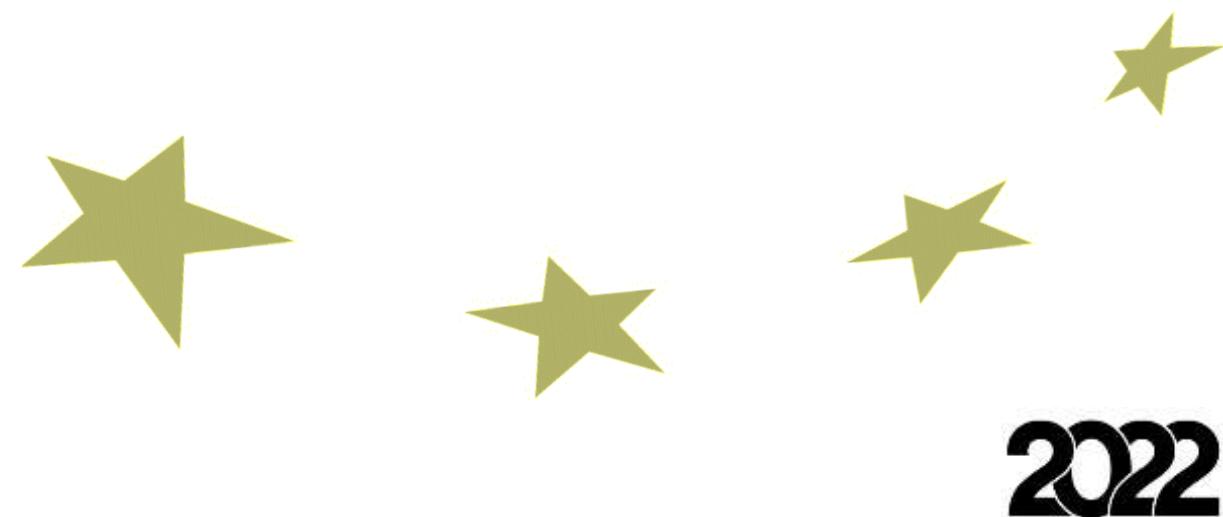


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# EU higher education systems - concepts and reality

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## Abstract

The quantitative and structural shape of higher education is always one of the most interesting and particularly controversial topics in higher education policy, and it leaves its clear mark on everyday university life, even if those involved are not always aware of it. The article will begin by clarifying the importance of the quantitative and structural shape: that we always direct our attention to national higher education systems, which are the most important aspects of the shape of the higher education system, the meaning of the two key terms of the discussion - "expansion" and "differentiation" - have and the importance of international comparison in this context.

## Key words

EU higher education systems, expansion, differentiation

## 1. Introduction

Firstly, higher education is not primarily understood as transnational, but rather as national.<sup>1</sup> That is not a matter of course. Higher education systems have many supranational components.

- In many fields, also known as disciplines, the knowledge is "universal" – that means it is equally valid all over the world.
- We are looking for knowledge all over the world in order to advance scientific progress.
- For scientists, it is part of this to cultivate international cooperation and to frequently travel to other countries for this purpose.
- Finally, many scientists see themselves as "cosmopolitans", as citizens of the world, who are not primarily shaped locally, regionally or nationally in their thoughts and actions, but rather by the knowledge and values of a large number of countries and cultures.

Yet higher education systems are surprisingly national.

- The rules governing universities are often determined at national level; the same applies to supervision and financing.

- The types of higher education institutions and the degree programs are also determined nationally.

- Even research is national in that it is primarily funded at national level and that its economic and social usefulness is considered at national level.

Second, higher education is not primarily understood as regional or local, but as national. Indeed, in the majority of countries in the world, the rules and funding of higher education are decided "centralistically" for the whole country. However, there is also a not inconsiderable number of countries in which regional state units decide on a variety of state tasks. In Europe, for example, not only the Federal Republic of Germany has such a federal structure, but also Austria, Switzerland and, to a certain extent, Great Britain. Outside Europe, for example, the United States of America, Canada, Brazil and Australia should be mentioned.

It differs from case to case how great the regions' organizational rights over universities are and how much the universities of a country actually differ significantly according to the regions:

- In some of these federal systems, the higher education system is controlled nationally and is therefore also nationally uniform (e.g. in Austria).
- In exceptional cases, all organizational rights lie with the regions and the differences between the universities between the regions are so great that one can hardly speak of a national system (e.g. in Switzerland).
- In the majority, however, there are far-reaching regional design and control rights, but also national influence; Despite regional peculiarities, we have identified clear national similarities between the universities (e.g. in the USA and Germany).

## 2. The quantitative-structural shape

If we want to find out something about the "university system" of a country, we expect to receive particularly detailed "quantitative-structural" information. Why do we like to be provided with quantitative-structural information?

There are three main reasons:

- They are there to give us an initial orientation.
- These are also features that can be shaped by the state and politics.

<sup>1</sup> ENDERS, E., DE BOER, H. F., WESTERHEIJDEN, D. F. (2011): Reform of Higher Education in Europe.





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