

How Diverse Are European Higher Education Systems?

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What do institutions such as the University of Cambridge, the German Police Academy, and the Academy of Fine Arts of Gdansk have in common? At first sight, they are completely different in terms of core missions, type of education delivered, and subjects taught. Yet, despite wide differences, some commonalities are also present: All these institutions deliver educational diplomas at the tertiary level and they are commonly identified as being part of the same system, generally labeled as a “higher education system.” Providers of tertiary- or even secondary-level degrees strive to be recognized as “higher education institutions” (HEIs), with the assumption that this brings benefits in terms of status, attracting students, and gaining resources from donors.

These remarks highlight the complexity of questions such as: What is higher education? What kind of institutions does it comprise? Can we identify types of institutions and are these common across national systems?

In the European context, such questions have become more complex in the past decades due to the expansion and differentiation of higher education from a core of (research-oriented and PhD-awarding) universities to a much more diverse system. In some countries, new “regional universities” have been created, while professional schools at the tertiary, and even at the secondary, levels have been increasingly integrated into higher education. Marketization also opened new spaces for private HEIs, particularly in the new member states of the European Union. As an outcome of these impressive dynamics, half of the European HEIs included in the European Tertiary Education Register have been founded after 1990.

National states have handled the differentiation processes differently. Some European countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands, engaged in wide-ranging reform, restructuring professional higher education in a second sector composed of “colleges” or “universities of applied sciences” (UAS), creating so-called “dual” or binary systems. Other countries, such as the United Kingdom, decided to widen the “university” label to include professional education, while others let market forces play without strong interventions structuring the system.

Analyzing the structure of higher education systems is not just a scholarly question, but is connected to some core questions about higher education policy at the national and European levels. Most scholars would agree that some level of differentiation is beneficial in order to address diverse requirements such as achieving international research excellence, broadening access to higher education, training professionals, and promoting regional development. But whether differentiation should be created through direct policy intervention—creating types of HEIs by regulation—or through market competition remains unclear.

Providing Empirical Evidence

A major issue in this debate has been the lack of comparable data. Many studies have proposed typologies of HEIs and/or of the structure of higher education systems, mostly based on expert observation of different countries. But typological distinctions such as the one between unitary and binary systems fall short of adequately covering the complexity of national systems, which in most cases comprise more than just one or two types—not to speak of systems such as the French system, which does not fit into any of the proposed types.

A newly published study by the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) provides some useful insights in this complex matter. [ETER](#) is a project supported by the European Commission that for the first time provides a reasonably complete register of HEIs

Abstract

A newly published report by the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER) project sheds new light on differences in the structure of European higher education systems. While the broad categorization in unitary vs. dual systems can still be applied, the distribution and differentiation of higher education within Europe is extremely heterogeneous in terms of distribution of students, subjects taught, and the extent of involvement in research.

The study provides a comparative analysis of the structure of higher education systems across all European countries.

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The ETER analytical report on Dual vs. unitary systems in Higher Education can be downloaded from <https://www.eter-project.com/#/analytical-reports>.

in Europe, descriptive and geographical information, as well as data on resources and educational and research activities gathered from national statistics (currently for the period 2011–2016). Despite some limitations in terms of data availability and comparability, particularly for financial information, ETER represents an unprecedented advance in the availability of comparable data on European HEIs.

Based on this data, the study provides a comparative analysis of the structure of higher education systems across all European countries. It builds on a categorization of HEIs in three broad groups: universities (PhD awarding), UAS, and other institutions, such as arts and music schools. It also considers the relative importance of these groups in terms of student numbers and composition of the student bodies (by educational level and by subject domain).

The report shows some systematic patterns, such as that UAS play a larger role in Northern and Western Europe than in Southern and Eastern European countries. However, while the broad categorization in unitary vs. dual systems can still be applied, the distribution and differentiation of higher education is extremely heterogeneous within Europe. In Bulgaria, for example, 97 percent of students are enrolled in universities. The Netherlands, on the other hand, have a high share of (mostly professional) higher education concentrated in UAS (61 percent of all enrolled students). In Latvia, as a further example of students' distribution, other institutions, such as academies and private, specialized higher education institutions, enroll a larger share of students (34 percent) than universities and UAS. The report also displays systematic differences in terms of subject composition, with UAS and other HEIs being more specialized than universities. As for research, universities have a clear mandate for research activities, while this is partly the case for UAS and other institutions. Eighty-nine percent of all universities in the ETER dataset are research active, which is also true for 72 percent of all UAS and 33 percent of all other institutions.

The historical dynamics, as observed through the foundation years, are also very different by HEI category. While some universities date back to the Middle Ages and a large number of them were created in the 1950s and 1960s, most UAS and many other institutions were founded after 1970, constituting a second wave of expansion of higher education.

Moving forward, this work will be refined by developing a more fine-grained classification that takes into account three complementary dimensions: the regulatory characteristics (such as the official label and the right to award a PhD), the institutional mission and self-representation of the HEI, and the actually observed activity profile in terms of education, research, and third mission. This will allow a much more accurate observation of the diversity of national higher education systems in Europe. ▲