

Ethnographies of higher education: researching and reflecting “at home”

CALL FOR PAPERS

22-24 May 2013, Prague, Czech Republic

Keynote speakers:

Wesley Shumar (Drexel University)

Paul Trowler (Lancaster University)

Susan Wright (Aarhus University)

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in ethnographic studies of higher education. Not only are anthropologists turning their attention to the study of higher education but also higher education researchers from various theoretical and methodological backgrounds are employing ethnography as a valuable approach to studying multiple facets, sites, and themes of higher education, be it the formation and enactment of governance and policies, knowledge practices, learning and teaching, identities, or academics' and students' lives. At the same time, the conference recognizes significant changes in the field of higher education today that are globally transforming not only the social, material and technological conditions and institutional frameworks of knowledge production, transmission and translation, but also affecting the very modes of knowing. We believe ethnographic approaches are a key research strategy for understanding these changes.

The conference aims to bring together researchers interested and actively involved in qualitative, primarily ethnographic, research on higher education institutions, policies and practices, and to provide space for critical discussion and debate. We also aim to prepare a publication or series of publications to bring these insights to the broader academic public.

We propose three major foci – and welcome more.

1. Politics, positionality and engagement

“Reforms” of, and changes in, higher education may be discussed, questioned, fought for and against, or they may take place in a more invisible manner. What are the possible roles of higher education research in that dynamic? How is ethnographic participation linked with policy and politics, activism and engagement? How are the roles of researchers, experts, and activists played out in different times and different settings? And from the other end, how do the multiple positions higher education researchers simultaneously occupy in the field (such as students, teachers, administrators, parents etc.) influence the framing of education research?

2. Diversity of the field and comparative practices

The field of higher education is diverse – in terms of disciplines, qualities, institutional forms. As such it is subject to various types of comparisons and rankings, made by agencies, ministries, media, students, academics, higher education institutions, and ultimately by us, higher education researchers. Since we are often critical of such comparisons and rankings, we need to examine explicitly our own epistemic practices of comparing in theoretical framing or field study designs. What role does (Western) social theory play in studying higher education in different parts of the world? How do we deal with heterogeneity of the field during the course of a study and in textual representations?

3. Ethnographic effects

In a special strand we propose to reflect on and debate ethnography as an epistemic approach to the study of higher education: its possibilities (and possible limits), politics and practices. This will have a format of a special methodological workshop within the conference. We welcome short contributions (2 to 10 minutes) on various topics related to fieldwork (reflexivity, ethics, access, being/going native etc.). The aim of the workshop is to share and discuss field experiences and explore potential intersecting topics emerging in the course of the discussions.

Abstracts of proposed papers or workshop contributions of 600 to 1000 words should be sent to the main organizer Karel Šima, karel.sima@centrum.cz, by January 15, 2013.

We will inform you about acceptance of your paper by February 15, 2013.

The deadline for registrations is April 15, 2013.

Conference fees

Conference fees include registration, welcome reception on Wednesday evening, and lunch and snacks on Thursday and Friday.

Standard: EUR 100

Students and doctoral candidates: EUR 50

It is possible to waive the fee for participants from lower-income countries and/or for participants in lower-paid positions without access to other sources of funding. To request a waiver, please send a letter (300-500 words) to the organizers explaining why you are not in a position to cover the fee.

The conference programme board

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Practical information

Travel and accommodation: Prague airport serves direct flights from all European capitals and many other European cities. Within Central Europe, Prague is also easily reachable by train. As a popular tourist destination, Prague offers a wealth of accommodation opportunities from budget hostels starting below 20 € per night up to luxury hotels. More information will be available on the conference website.

Conference venue: The conference will take place at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and Charles University.

Programme framework: The conference will start with an evening public lecture on Wednesday, May 22. Thursday and Friday programme will start with a plenary keynote, followed by paper presentations. The Friday afternoon will be dedicated to the methodological workshop.

See conference website <http://www.ethe.cz> for further information.

The conference is supported by the Czech Science Foundation within the research project "Ethnography of University Departments: Mass Higher Education in Institutional Settings" (<http://www.csvs.cz/ETUDE>).