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**Abstract**

Changes of the shape and the size of higher education systems have been a key issue of both higher education policy and higher education research for more than four decades. It is widely assumed that the expansion of student enrolment was the most powerful factor in evoking structural change and has caused increasing diversification. This article shows, in contrast, that structural changes were less convergent until the 1990s across economically advanced countries, because policies responded not only to presumed common functional demands, but opted for varying political targets and took into consideration the national traditions of higher education systems. Moreover, 'expansion and diversification' concepts were challenged and supplemented by 'academic drift', 'flexibilization' and 'cyclical concepts'. Most recently, other factors ? notably growing international cooperation, globalization, new steering and management systems, and moves towards a knowledge society ? contributed to an increasing complexity of underlying forces. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)