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**Author**

SCHULZE-CLEVEN, Tobias

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**Abstract**

The higher education sector has been undergoing a far-reaching institutional re-orientation during the past two decades. Many adjustments appear to have strengthened the role of competition in the governance of higher education, but the character of the sector's emerging new political economy has frequently remained unclear. Serving as the introduction for the special issue, this article makes the case for a multidimensional strategy to probe higher education's competitive transformation. In terms of conceptualizing the major empirical shifts, we argue for analyzing three core phenomena: varieties of academic capitalism, the discursive construction of inequality, and the transformation of hierarchies in competitive settings. With respect to theoretical tools, we emphasize the complementary contributions of institutional, class-oriented, and discourse analytical approaches. As this introduction elaborates and the contributions to the special issue demonstrate, critical dialog among different analytical traditions over the interpretation of change is crucial for improving established understandings. Arguably, it is essential for clarifying the respective roles of capitalist

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power and hierarchical rule in the construction of the sector's new order. (HRK / Abstract  
übernommen) Reitz, Tilman, E-Mail: [tilann.reitz@uni-jena.de](mailto:tilann.reitz@uni-jena.de)