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**Title**

Three decades of implementation research in higher education : limitations and prospects of theory development

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**Abstract**

The article adopts a comparative approach to review three periods of theory development in research into higher education policy implementation. Given the conceptual affinity between Cerych and Sabatier's 1986 seminal study into higher education policy implementation and public policy implementation theory, the field of public policy is chosen for reference and comparison. The article argues, first, that the underlying characteristics of higher education research such as sector-isolatedness, application drift and sensitivity to political agendas hindered the development of sector-specific theories of policy implementation. Second, this gap in theory formation started to be narrowed from the late 1990s onwards, due to critical reappraisal of the 1986 study and due to limited utilisation of mid-range theory concepts conceived within or related to the public policy field. It is through the utilisation of such public policy theory that higher education implementation research may reach a more mature stage. (HRK / Abstract übernommen)