

## How to enhance quality of higher education research by implementing a network of higher education researchers

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## ***Abstract***

### **How to enhance quality of higher education research by implementing a network of higher education researchers**

The paper sheds a light on the establishment of a national network of higher education research in Austria (henceforth NHERA) focussing on its contribution towards quality enhancement in national higher education research. Through the theoretical lens of the functions and missions of academic associations on the one hand and the theory of quality culture on the other hand, we explore the potentials of national network building for professionalization and innovation in HE studies. Based on this theoretical framework, we analyse the actual steps of establishment of NHERA and their (potential) impact. This helps to gain knowledge of the so far reached aims as well as further potential and necessary network shaping to foster its role as agent of national HE research and development.

## **Presentation**

# **How to enhance quality of higher education research by implementing a network of higher education researchers**

## **INTRODUCTION**

In its early stages, higher education (HE) research in Austria was mostly driven by state commissioned research. It fulfilled orientation and legitimation purposes for higher education policy reforms in the course of the massification of the HE system. In the 1990s and 2000s, the second cycle of Austrian HE reforms mainly focusing on HEIs' governance structures, the role of HE research in Austria changed. This external (policy driven) factor fostered the interest in HE research, increased institutional research and has led to a diversification of relevant research questions. However, HE research has not yet managed to anchor firmly in academia at public universities, which inhibits curiosity driven research and the overall quality of higher education research in Austria (Pechar 2017).

Based on the observation that there are several Austrian HE researchers, but no vital national community, a group of HE researchers started an initiative to build an Austrian network of HE researchers in 2015. Following Altbach's (2014, p. 1316) argument that

“the creation of knowledge networks and the means for communicating information is central to the establishing of any scientific field; and makes it possible for research and analysis to be provided to academic leaders, government officials, and other stakeholders” (Altbach 2014, p. 1316),

this paper analyses the first steps of the Network Higher Education Research Austria (*Netzwerk Hochschulforschung Österreich*). From the insider's perspective of researchers engaging in the network, it raises the question how such an academic network can enhance the quality of HE research in Austria. To that end, we first show how HE studies can be characterised as field and community. Second, we draw on literature revealing common functions, missions and aims of academic associations. Based on these theoretical perspectives, we analyse the activities of the Austrian network of HE research. Finally, we discuss the potential of those activities to enhance 'quality culture' in the field of Austrian HE research.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### **Higher Education studies as field and community**

In recent years, several HE scholars comprehensively reflected on features of their field (e.g. Altbach 1995; Teichler 1996; Teichler and Sadlak 2000; Tight 2004, 2008; Teichler 2008; Tight 2012b, 2012a; Macfarlane 2012; Harland 2012; Clegg 2012; Kehm and Musselin 2013; Rumbley et al. 2014; Altbach 2014; Yokoyama 2016). Being aware of HE studies' manifold characteristics discussed in this strand of literature, in this paper, we will focus on only some of those characteristics, which seem to be of specific relevance for the scope of this paper – the analysis of a recently founded national network of HE researchers in Austria and its potentials to enhance quality of HE research and development.

*HE studies as stemming from practice and often driven by current policy discourse.* Different to other new disciplines (Weingart 2015), HE it did not arise as a sub-field from any other discipline such as education but stems from practical concerns about postsecondary education and its institutions (Altbach 2014; Yokoyama 2016). Even today, HE research to a great extent gains its legitimacy through its relevance to policy and practice. Correspondingly, there is an ongoing discussion about academic rigor of HE research and HE researchers seem to be divided into two groups (Teichler 2008) of either more applied scholars and those who strive for “a firmer intellectual foundation, a more critical and sharper analytical edge and a stronger institutional base within higher education.” (Locke 2009, pp. 122–123)

*HE studies as multi-institutional endeavour.* Higher education research is conducted in a broad range of institutional settings (Altbach 2014). As many other interdisciplinary fields, HE studies is less stably institutionalised at universities than traditional disciplines. University positions and professorships are scarce and the number of academic programmes and degrees specifically focussing on HE studies is small (Teichler 2008; Altbach 2014). However, research on higher education can also be embedded in other university contexts, e.g. as a main topic or short-term issue in a disciplinary department for educational studies or business administrations (Teichler 2008). Even at universities, but on the more administratively than scholarly (or somewhere in between), research on higher education is conducted in institutional research departments (Huisman et al. 2015). Further, there are university centres, which are based in the interface between research and practice, such as centres for academic development (Teichler 2008; Harland 2012). Non-university institutional contexts of research on HE are public or publicly funded research institutions, government departments, and consulting firms.

*HE studies as multidisciplinary field.* HE research is often described not as a discipline in a traditional manner, but a multidisciplinary field, “an interdisciplinary endeavour based on the social sciences” (Altbach 2014, p. 1308) defined by its object of inquiry – higher education (Teichler 1996; Harland 2009; Yokoyama 2016). Hence, HE studies may be understood as “a multiple series of intersecting cognate fields rather than one that is discrete” (Macfarlane and Grant 2012, p. 621). However, due to the increasing institutionalisation of HE study programmes, graduate schools and PhD programmes, a new generation of researchers with specialist qualifications in HE research becomes more and more senior in the field (Macfarlane 2012; Rumbley et al. 2014).

*HE studies as highly fragmented, loosely coupled community.* In course of time, HE research has established a discipline-like infrastructure of research and training centres, journals, conferences and communities of researchers (Altbach 2014). However, equal to other multidisciplinary field such as entrepreneurship or innovation studies, the community of HE researchers seem to be highly fragmented and only loosely coupled, “which makes it difficult to identify a well-defined group of scholars” interested in higher education (Landström and Harirchi 2018, p. 650). In the most comprehensive manner, the ‘community’ of HE researchers includes “anyone who takes an interest in higher education issues, carries out a systematic project to discover more and then seeks publication of the outcomes” (Harland 2009, p. 579). Accordingly, there are several ‘groups’ conducting HE research (Harland 2012): full-time HE researchers located in education or other university departments, government or specialist research institutions; part-time HE researchers “who make up the vast majority of researchers but usually see higher education as secondary interest” (Harland 2012, p. 704), often addressing issues of teaching and learning in their specific discipline; as well as academic developers, institutional researchers, experts in higher education didactics, university managers and administrators who link both research and practice. Further differentiation can be drawn on the topics HE scholars are interested in, ranging from teaching and learning, course design, student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work, and knowledge and research (Tight 2012a; Teichler 2008). Macfarlane (2012, pp. 129–130) particularly highlights the separation of “policy-based and teaching- and learning-oriented researchers who rarely, in [his] experience, have much awareness of each other’s scholarship.” Given this heterogeneity, Harland (2012) depict HE studies as an open-access and inclusive field.

Different to disciplines such as chemistry or law, colleagues outside of full-time HE research publish on higher education without having any kind of formalized qualification. It somehow seems that anyone who is in higher education can study it or write about it academically (whatever that means), especially about teaching and learning aspects. Accordingly, “in these times of research accountability there are increasing numbers of non-research active staff trying their hand at research into teaching and learning which can be very difficult for them because they have no training, receive little support and have no natural home department in their institution” (Harland 2009, p. 582). This raises questions about quality and quality standards in HE studies, the role of the scientific community as both supporting and controlling entity, as well as “whether or not an inclusive higher education community undermines its own disciplinary status” (Harland 2009, p. 579).

Further, the diversity of HE researchers raises questions on the unity and cohesion of HE studies’ academic community. Yokoyama (2016, p. 558) depicts HE scholars as loosely coupled community and note that “there is no clear-cut and unity identity of the higher education field, but one that is fragmented and ambiguous”. Comparable to other multidisciplinary fields, such as innovation studies (Landström and Harirchi 2018), HE research-

ers seem to be organised in several communities (Clegg 2012; Tight 2004), “characterized by a specific combination of scholarly inspiration, meeting places, and journals” (Landström and Harirchi 2018, p. 650).

*HE studies as national as well as international field.* On the one hand, HE studies are described and somehow criticised as being “so much shaped by national views and experiences that national peculiarities are interpreted as universal phenomena of higher education” (Teichler 2013b, p. 9). On the other hand, related to the increasing maturity of the field, it’s infrastructure has been gaining internationality, but is still often biased towards English-speaking developed countries and significant strength in the USA, Western Europe and in China (Altbach 2014). Several research centres as well as international associations, such as the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER), have been established to enhance the comparative perspective in HE analyses (Teichler 2013a). University strategies and HE policies are increasingly inspired by good- or best-practices from other countries, and several international organisations such as World Bank, UNESCO, and OECD are funding research on higher education (Altbach 2014).

*HE studies as field constantly short of funding.* Actually, in most states, there is no funding at all for research on higher education. Even in countries which provide some funding, “the amounts are seldom adequate or sustained” (Altbach 2014, p. 1314). Consequently, there is a lack of data, analysis, and knowledge about many national higher education systems. More commonly, HE research is funded either by the sponsoring universities (in terms of institutional research or professorships), by philanthropic foundations interested in supporting higher education development or particular programmes, or by European level programmes of EU commission, European University Association, and others (Altbach 2014).

The stressed current features of HE studies as field and community, which correspond nearly one-to-one with the national context of Austrian HE research, affect the necessities, possibilities and functions of an academic network or association of HE researchers.

### **Functions and missions of academic associations**

Scientific or academic associations are under-researched in the field of social studies of science – “[...] there is little reflection on what they do and for what they do it, or on their relation with the context in which they are embedded” (Delicado et al. 2014, p. 440). However, there is a small strand of research specifically focusing on the functions and missions of academic societies. In his analysis of the German system, Schimank (1988) identified core functions of scientific associations (communicational, professional, transfer and promotion). Recent publications defined more extended and fine-grained missions: Fumasoli and Seeber (2017) developed eight categories of aims to examine European academic associations: professional interests of the (1) discipline and (2) academics; (3) foster standards; (4) conduct research; (5) address social problems; (6) disseminate knowledge; (7) promote science policy; and (8) enhance ethics. In a comparable vein, Delicado et al. (2014) identified different functions of a broad variety of Portuguese scientific associations. They addressed internal functions such as community-building, allocation of scientific capital, reproduction of the scientific field, internationalisation of national science, and the production of science (though this has nearly dissolved). Further, they identified several external missions such as policy-advice, interest representation and lobbying, as well as amassment of social support for science. Table 1 contrasts these different catalogues of scientific associations’ functions and missions.

Schimank (1988) – focussing on national scientific associations (Germany)	Delicado et al. (2014) – focusing on national scientific associations (Portugal)	Fumasoli and Seeber (2017) – focusing on European academic associations
<p><i>Communicative function</i>            “These associations are supposed to contribute to a fast and extensive diffusion of research results among all interested scientists.” (Schimank 1988, pp. 69–70)</p>	<p><i>Internal role: community-building</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community-building is one of the strongest missions of scientific associations</li> <li>• Key instrument: conferences</li> </ul> <p>“Conferences are [...] one of the expressions of this community-building [and] an opportunity for face-to-face contact between peers and to transmit tacit or informal knowledge.[...] Conferences also foster the enrolment of new members and inter-institutional cohesion, since they are usually held at different locations, relying on the collaboration between the association’s governance structure and a local organising committee [...].” (Delicado et al. 2014, pp. 454–455)</p> <p><i>Internal role: allocation of scientific capital</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awards and grants for new research projects or as a reward for completed work (conference papers, articles, books, etc.), support for conference attendance or training programmes, recognition of individual careers or collective achievements</li> <li>• Publication of articles in associations’ own journal(s)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Aim: professional interests of academics</i>            “connecting members, disseminating information and research outcomes to members, defending interest of members, facilitate exchange between researchers, offering professional training to members, accrediting professionals.” (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p>
-	<p><i>Internal role: producing science</i>            „The production of science was at the core of the activities of the early scientific societies.”(Delicado et al. 2014, p. 447) Today, this function only plays a minor role and many scientific associations refrain from engaging in research projects.</p>	<p><i>Aim: conduct research</i>            “undertaking/coordinating research, collecting and analysing information, being part of research partnerships/projects” (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p>
<p><i>Professional functions</i>            “Within the relevant discipline or subdiscipline, these [professional] functions can be served by advising and supporting students in their professional careers or by organizing further professional training courses. Furthermore, scientific associations can represent the professional interests of the respective scientists - including status interests - within the research system and the society at large.” (Schimank 1988, p. 70)</p>	<p><i>Internal role: reproduction of the scientific field through...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Informal training of junior researchers (by socialisation and standard setting, supporting of postgraduate theses, running training courses, advertising jobs and internship placements)</li> <li>• Organisation of conferences</li> <li>• Publication of scientific journals</li> </ul> <p><i>Internal role: internationalisation of national science</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contacts with international associations support the participation of scientists in international networks</li> <li>• National conferences attract foreign researchers either as (keynote) speakers or participants</li> </ul>	<p><i>Aim: professional interests of the discipline</i>            “developing, improving, promoting, supporting, encouraging, intensifying, coordinating, strengthening, stimulating the discipline [and] coordinating, supporting, enhancing research and knowledge.” (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p> <p><i>Aim: foster standards</i>            “mutual and reciprocal recognition, registry, improve methods, best or good practice, promote excellence, be a reference, produce guidelines, self-registration, harmonize, quality assurance, rules of equivalence between countries, certification” (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p> <p><i>Aim: enhance ethics</i>            “maintenance of, for example, the wellbeing of patients/animals during treatment or research”</p>

<p><i>Transfer function</i>          "Another important function of scientific associations can provide institutionalized settings where scientists can meet actual and potential users of their research results. [...] In drawing their members from universities and other state-financed research institutions, as well as from these users, scientific associations become settings in which research efforts and potential applications may be compared and coordinated with each other." (Schimank 1988, p. 70)</p>	<p><i>External role: policy advice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement in political decision-making processes or advisory function</li> <li>• Less formalised: politically requested or self-initiative evaluations of new legislation or policy documents</li> <li>• Influence through informal channels and personal connections of individual associations' members</li> </ul>	<p><i>Aim: addressing social problems</i>          e.g. "improving citizens' health, defend human rights, support European integration, enhance free market, foster multiculturalism, etc." (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p> <p><i>Aim: disseminate knowledge</i>          "spreading of information, outcomes, knowledge not referred to academics/members. Also: public awareness, collaborating with any stakeholders except other academic associations [e.g.] policy makers at all levels, individual citizens, specific groups (farmers, children ...), NGOs, industry and business." (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p>
<p><i>Science promotion</i>          "Scientific associations may themselves promote certain research projects. They may maintain contact with research institutes and with political or semipolitical institutions of science promotion. Finally, scientific associations may advise administrations or political actors in questions of science policy. In these ways, scientific associations can serve as representatives of their disciplines and subdisciplines in administrative and political decision-making." (Schimank 1988, p. 70)</p>	<p><i>External role: amassing social support for science</i>          Given the raised awareness of the necessity "to be accountable to citizens and to amass social support" scientific associations can build bridges between science and society by mobilising scientists, adding legitimacy by acting as a collective and by a certain neutrality "in view of particular interests of universities and research institutions [...]." (Delicado et al. 2014, pp. 460–461)</p> <p><i>External role: interest representation and lobbying</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Associations thus act as intermediaries between researchers and employers (universities, research centres, companies, or government agencies) or funding agencies or those in charge of designing science policy." (Delicado et al. 2014, pp. 456–458)</li> </ul>	<p><i>Aim: promote science policy</i>          Participation "in the policy process (agenda setting, policy formation, adoption, implementation, and evaluation)" (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017, p. 8)</p>

**Table 1: Functions and missions of academic associations**



Several groups of associations can be defined depending on the functions, missions, and aims a specific association devotes itself to. Fumasoli and Seeber (2017) identified five types of associations, ranging from profession-, standards- or discipline-oriented ones to those who pursue multiple aims either more socially or scientifically oriented. Comparably, in a historical analysis of international scientific societies between 1870 and 1990, Schofer (2003) distinguished between two types of associations, one more professionally orientated that focused on professional interest of specific scientific fields, and one more socially oriented type, which primarily aimed to disseminate knowledge, to address social problems or to promote ethics (Delicado et al. 2014).

While such typologies may be understood as primarily analytical, two international associations in HE can be used to illustrate these two types by tendency. In the 1980s, the Consortium of Higher Education Researchers (CHER) has been established to provide an exclusive forum for HE researchers, where they can focus on theories and methods "without always being mixed with all sorts of higher education experts and actors." (Teichler 2013a, p. 247). Even today, one of CHER's core aim is to foster "the theoretical base and the quality of research on higher education" (CHER 2018). Different to that, in 1979, the European Association of Institutional Research's (EAIR) has been established "as an association of experts and professionals interested in the relationship between research, policy and practice" (EAIR 2018b) with an explicitly inclusive interest in HE (Huisman et al. 2015). While one of EAIR's aim is the promotion of research, they also focus on the development of institutional practice and policy implementation, dissemination of information that supports policy-making and good practice in HE, and "bringing together students, researchers, policymakers, leaders, administrators and practitioners" (EAIR 2018a).

Both CHER and EAIR are international organisations, located in Europe but comprising members from all over the world. In this paper, however, we are going to address the development of a national network of HE researchers. While, international scientific associations have gained importance in the course of increasing internationalisation of science and the discussion of HE on an international level is essential for the quality and progress of the field, national academic associations still play a notable role in HE and scientific systems (Delicado et al. 2014). Deeply embedded into national contexts, HE is particularly shaped by national regulations and administration, study programmes and certificates, research funding, etc. Accordingly, albeit the number of comparative studies is constantly growing, the national perspective still dominates HE research (Teichler 2008, 1996). Thus, national associations are essential for community-building of HE researchers examining a particular countries' HE system and linking national researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. Especially in terms of knowledge dissemination, they can act as broker of international research findings, particularly in countries where the first language is not English. Further, they can support the discussion of issues relevant for a specific national context, but outside the scope of the international scientific community. Moreover, they can provide a low-threshold entrance into scientific discussions and community for young or less experienced HE researchers.

In the next section of the paper, we are going to apply these theoretical perspectives to the young network of HE researchers in Austria.

## THE NETWORK HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH AUSTRIA (NHERA)

In 2015, researchers of the Centre for Educational Management and HE Development at the Danube University Krems and the Department for HE Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies Vienna launched an initiative for a national network of individual HE researchers. Since kick-off, more than 100 potentially interested Austrian researchers have been contacted and invited to several network-meetings.

The "Network Higher Education Research Austria" (henceforth NHERA) so far follows a very open access approach. It consists of researchers *active in Austria* who are (not necessarily exclusively, but regularly) *involved in HE research* topics and who contribute to the advancement of HE studies on system, institutional or actor level. It is expected that the research activities go beyond the scope of the own institution (i.e. beyond institutional



research) and that the research is, at least partially, published or presented at scientific conferences. Membership is not yet formalized in a specific way – at the current stage, member of the network is who engages in the network’s activities.

The goals of the network are:

- [A] to link researchers and institutions active in HE studies throughout Austria
- [B] to foster the scholarly discourse on HE research with focus on Austria and to pool academic expertise
- [C] to support young scholars
- [D] to foster international networking
- [E] to enhance the visibility and addressability of HE research in Austria
- [F] to raise awareness of the value and availability of HE research for HE policy, HE institutional leadership and administration

Looking at Fumasoli and Seeber’s (2017) coding scheme regarding the aims of European academic professions, it shows that NHERA falls under both categories “Professional academic associations (Type 1) and “Socially oriented academic associations” (Type 2), as the network emphasises both, the promotion of academic research and its dissemination and transfer.

To avoid redundancy and a repetitive discussion of the NHERA case, we refer most to the concept of Delicado et al (2014). As this scheme does not cover a direct equivalent to Fumasoli & Seeber’s (2017) aim to set standards, we will also refer there. Table 2 shows the linkages between NHERA activities, the association’s aims and the roles for scientific associations according to Delicado et al. A more detailed discussion with examples that illustrate these linkages follows underneath.

Activity	NHERA’s aim	Role (Delicado et al. 2014)
[1] Bi-annual network meetings	[A] linking HE researchers [B] support young scholars	Internal role: community building I (scientific community) Aim: foster standards (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017)
[2] Stakeholder discussion forums	[E] enhancing the visibility of HE research [F] raising stakeholders’ awareness of HE studies’ value [B] fostering scholarly discourse	Internal role: community building II (professional community) External role: policy advice
[3] Mapping of Austrian HE research(ers)	[A] linking HE researchers [B] (support) pooling academic expertise [C] supporting young scholars [D] fostering international networking [E] enhancing visibility and addressability [F] raising stakeholders’ awareness of HE studies’ value	Internal role: community building I (scientific community) Internal role: community building II (professional community)
[4] Conference	[A] linking HE researchers [B] fostering the scholarly discourse and (support) pooling academic expertise [C] support young scientists [D] foster international networking [E] enhancing visibility and addressability [F] raising stakeholders’ awareness of HE studies’ value	Internal role: community building I (scientific community) Internal role: community building II (professional community) Internal role: reproduction of the scientific field Internal role: internationalisation of national science Internal role: allocation of scientific capital Aim: foster standards (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017)
[5] Book series	[B] fostering the scholarly discourse [C] support young scholars [E] enhancing visibility	Internal role: allocation of scientific capital Internal role: reproduction of the scientific field Aim: foster standards (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017)
[6] Newsletter	[B] fostering the scholarly discourse [C] support young scholars [E] enhancing visibility	Internal role: community building I (scientific community) Internal role: community building II (professional community) Internal role: internationalisation of national science
[7] Joint policy statements	[B] fostering scholarly discourse and pooling academic expertise [E] enhancing the visibility [F] raising stakeholders’ awareness of HE studies’ value	External role: policy advice

[8] Research collaborations	[A] linking researchers [B] foster the scholarly discourse [C] supporting young scholars [E] enhancing the visibility and addressability [F] raising stakeholders' awareness of HE studies' value	Internal role: producing science Internal role: internationalisation of national science
[9] Online repository / digital library	[B] foster the scholarly discourse [C] supporting young scholars [E] enhancing the visibility and addressability [F] raising stakeholders' awareness of HE studies' value	Internal role: community building I (scientific community) Internal role: community building II (professional community) Internal role: reproduction of the scientific field Aim: foster standards (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017)

**Table 2: NHERA activities, aims, and roles according to Delicado et al. (2014)**

[1] At the **biannual network meetings**, the members of the network exchange their views and knowledge on current topics. Accordingly, these meetings fulfil both the aim of connecting members and facilitating the scholarly exchange between researchers. Hosting the network meetings in different locations all over Austria is an attempt to attract new members from various Austrian regions. In the beginning, the main discussion topics during the network meetings evolved around the network itself: its goals and functions, formal status as well as upcoming activities. The share of context-related discussion has been increasing and should increase further. The network meetings are open to all (including young) higher education researchers in Austria (self-definition) and therefore facilitate the development of a (local) scientific community in the field (“internal role: community-building I”, Delicado et al 2014). Through ongoing discussions about the characteristics of higher education research and researchers at the network meetings, standards evolve (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017).

[2] During the first round of network meetings, the network recurrently held **discussion forums with stakeholders**, such as science journalists, current and former secretary-generals at the science ministry, industry and student representatives. The discussions between these stakeholders and the HE researchers addressed the potential role of HE in Austria, the topics relevant for the different groups, and media or communication channels that can be used by HE researchers to attract stakeholders' attention. This activity assured that Austrian higher education research is embedded in a wider, practical community (“internal role: community-building II”). As several of these stakeholders have direct or indirect influence on “policy level”, this role can also be assigned. (Delicado et al 2014)

[3] Furthermore, **mapping higher education research in Austria** is one of the first key activities of the network. To that end, an online questionnaire was developed to allow HE researchers to make themselves and their fields of study and interest visible. The list of researchers is published on the network's website and has been passed on to several stakeholders. It has been updated and enlarged several times and, status quo 2018, comprises 95 people who declare themselves as Austrian HE researchers. This endeavour pursued two purposes, first, connecting HE researchers by animating members to seek for new cooperation within the field, and, second, disseminating knowledge or raising awareness for the field by giving outsiders the chance to see the current scope of Austrian HE research. Further, young scientists have had the chance to present themselves and their fields of research and interest. As the mapping addresses both members and external stakeholders, it contributes to the building of a scientific and professional community (internal roles: community-building I and II, Delicado et al 2014)

[4] In December 2017, NHERA organised the first Austrian HE studies **conference**, the second will follow in March 2019. These conference fulfil a threefold function: First, they allow to disseminate knowledge among a large group of members and stakeholders. Second, they provide networking opportunity and, third, they are an opportunity to get feedback to research projects, which can be seen as a sort of quality assurance mechanism provided by peers. Conferences contribute to reach all of NHERA's aims, and they take a prominent role Delicado et al's classification. In addition to the internal roles, NHERA conferences attract numerous participants from the science ministry and can therefore also be seen as contribution to NHERA's external role of policy making. As conference contributions are peer-reviewed, the conferences also contribute to standard setting (Fumasoli and

Seeber 2017).

[5] Following the first conference, the network prepares a proceeding publication that should be, at the same time, the first issue of a **book series** on higher education in Austria. In addition to conference proceedings, the series should feature research results including doctoral dissertations. The network speakers act as the editorial board. Therefore, in the classification by Delicado et al (2014), the network fulfils the internal roles to allocate scientific capital and to reproduce the scientific field. As the publication is peer-reviewed, it also contributes to standard setting (Fumasoli and Seeber 2017).

[6] Regular **newsletters** are sent out by the network secretariat. Typical contents of the newsletter include updates on and invitations to NHERA's activities, recent publications, calls for proposals, conferences and other events, and job announcements. This communication facilitates the researchers' exchange among each other and with stakeholders (internal roles: community-building I and II) and, when spreading international publications or events, can fuel internationalisation (internal role: internationalisation of national science, Delicado et al. 2014)

[7] NHERA has twice participated in public **consultation processes** and plans to do so in the future. Until now, the network has provided feedback on the national universities development plan (Universitätsentwicklungspan) and on the national strategy on social dimension in HE. With these statements, the network fulfils the external role of policy advice (Delicado et al. 2014).

[8] From the beginning of the network, **research collaboration** among its members has been a major goal. This should be fuelled through the socializing and exchange between higher education researchers, but also through the diffusion of new developments in higher education, be it on national / political or international level. To initiate research cooperation, a bar camp with following group discussions was held in 2018. The activity resulted in different project ideas that should be transformed into publications, project proposals etc. In Delicado et al.'s (2014) scheme, this goes in line with the internal roles "research activities" and, if results are presented on international level, to the "internationalisation of national science".

[9] The networks also prepares the creation of an **online repository / digital library** that should list publications on Austrian higher education (starting with the most recent and scientific publications, later it should also include grey literature). This repository should make it easier for practitioners and higher education researchers to find publications on Austrian higher education. Consequently, this should lead to stronger use of research results in higher education management and governance. In Delicado's (2014) classification, this could be grouped under "community-building I and II" and "reproduction of the scientific field". When realized, the library will also allow to compare the network members' self-definition in the Mapping (see above) with actual research output, though restricted to publications. This activity is expected to contribute to foster standards as listed by Fumasoli and Seeber (2017).

Focussing on the scheme by Delicado et al (2014), the analysis of NHERA's current activities reveals that they fulfil both internal and external roles for HE research in Austria. While each internal role can be aligned with several activities, it is more difficult to cover the external roles of "amassing social support for science" and "interest representation and lobbying". Keeping in mind the modest size of the academic field and the young age of its network, NHERA's power vis-à-vis HEIs, science funds etc. seems rather limited. On the individual level though, several network members surely have a policy impact in higher education through projects assigned by public entities and HEIs. The Austrian science ministry (called Ministry of Education, Science and Research at the time of writing) has repeatedly expressed support for higher education research and supports the network financially.

## DISCUSSION

The main question of this paper is how a network of higher education researchers can contribute to the quality enhancement of HE education research on a national level. For this purpose, we apply the theoretical lens of seeing quality enhancement as based on social learning, and both scientific knowledge production and policy-

making as a social endeavour. Hence, our discussion of the Austrian network of higher education researchers will be guided by the concept of quality culture<sup>1</sup>. In their 2006 publication “Quality culture in European Universities: A Bottom-Up Approach”, the EUA finds the following definition for quality culture<sup>2</sup>:

"[Q]uality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: on the one hand, a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality and, on the other hand, a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts." (EUA 2006, p. 10)

Though the term ‘organisational’ refers to higher education institutions in this definition, here, the concept of quality culture is applied to the rather informal organisation of a network of HE researchers.

First, as depicted in the first section of this paper, HE is highly fragmented, in terms of topics, quality and orientation of research, as well as disciplinary perspectives on HE. Forming a network raises the question of *what is HE research?* While there is a quite high consent about the criteria for high-quality research (publications, citations, etc.), on the applied end, distinctions from e.g. consultancy or strategic papers (e.g. sponsored by single institutions or lobby groups) are fuzzy. In the case of NHERA, an explicit boundary is drawn to “pure” institutional research, i.e. research activities that are primarily focussing on the own institution with the aim of organisational development. Further, a *definition of ‘HE researcher’* is required – who can be a member of the network? Given the diversity of full-time or part-time researchers and their institutional and disciplinary backgrounds, answering this question is a tricky task to undertake. On the one hand, NHERA wants to be as open and inclusive as possible in the first step to render the high variety of Austrian HE researchers and their activities visible, and to prove that HE research by now is a relevant field in the Austrian academic landscape. On the other hand, NHERA runs the risk to become too random and comprise members that are too disconnected in their scopes of interests, so that community-building becomes impossible. Further, being too inclusive is often perceived as having low-level quality standards. Being aware of those contradictions, the network proceeded growth cautiously, starting with a small core group and extending the group of invitees for every network meeting. Quite a similar issue can be seen prevailing in the mapping of Austrian HE research. The “Mapping” allows HE researchers to declare themselves and become visible for other researchers (as well as stakeholders). However, as there is just a questionnaire to answer without furnishing any evidence for the extent and quality of the own research activities, there is no substantial mechanism of quality assurance inherent to this tool. Accordingly, NHERA plans to link both “Mapping” and the digital repository of publications to see who is really publishing in certain fields of HE studies and in which quality. However, the assessment of researchers’ competence is still on to the peers themselves.

Second, with NHERA, Austrian HE research has got a forum for exchange on context-specific quality features. Network meetings and conferences allow to get to know each other and to discuss research and its quality. Scholars are compelled to present the research on both occasions, in the network meetings more informally, and more formally, following a process of proposal writing, peer review and acceptance, at the conference. Discussing research with scholars is one of the most established tools of quality assurance in science and academia; of course, this also counts for HE studies. By providing a forum for these discussions, NHERA supports the enhancement of research quality. This is crucial for research focussing on specific national issues, since such research endeavours sometimes attract less attention or get less useful feedback at international conferences.

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<sup>1</sup> In an extended analysis, we are going to enrich the discussion by applying two further concepts, communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) and epistemic communities (Haas 1992). However, given the limited presentation time we will focus on quality culture at the EAIR conference.

<sup>2</sup> As Harvey and Stensaker (2008) showed, it is difficult to derive or define the concept based on scientific research. Reflecting on the “blackbox” quality culture, Findlay (2017) meant “(...) of course it is never straightforward to pin down exactly a definition of a moving object, and quality culture is exactly that, a shifting process in a changing context.” Hence, quality culture takes a prominent role in quality assurance of European higher education (compare e.g. the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), 2015)).

Moreover, a national conference can encourage young or less experienced researchers to present their work. Equal aims are attained by publication of peer-reviewed conference proceedings and books.

Third, knowing each other and evaluating each other's work (peer evaluation) are the prerequisites for further (research) collaboration. The networks activities related to community building can act as forum for the (implicit or explicit) negotiation of research quality, assessment of competence and built of trust, and, therefore, can foster future research collaboration and joint projects.

Fourth, negotiation and assessment of research quality and competence is not only fostered between HE researchers, but also in the discussions with stakeholders such as policy-makers, science journalists, industry and student representatives. Raising the questions of what kind of HE studies, topics, etc. are relevant for those groups, allows to discuss "quality" on a different level. However, we have to be aware that "research quality" can be defined quite different in academic, political, and practical spheres, and orienting research towards those understandings can cause contradictions.

Given this analysis of NHERA's activities in the light of enhancing 'quality culture' in Austrian HE research, we can conclude that the network emphasised the definition of HE research and HE researchers (cultural/psychological element). However, its main benefit for 'quality culture' can be seen in defining processes that assure quality by coordinating peer evaluation and review (structural/managerial element). All activities that enable and structure the exchange of researchers lead to, what the EUA calls "coordination of individual efforts". As this discussion of NHERA's activities vis-à-vis the EUA definition of quality culture shows, it is reasonable to argue that NHERA supports a positive quality culture in Austrian HE research.

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