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Student evaluation of teaching and student centeredness in the Humboldtian and Emirati tribal traditions of higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study is the result of interviewing administrators and academics as well as conducting content analysis of student evaluation of teaching (SET) forms in 14 universities in Germany and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The aim was to establish whether and if so, how, this procedure differs in two highly hierarchical social and academic contexts. We found that SETs have been adopted by all the universities we visited between 2001 and 2013, for some courses in Germany and for all of those in the United Arab Emirates. National and regional higher education laws and accreditation procedures act as coercive and normative mechanisms that promote SET's implementation in Germany and the UAE, respectively. It emerged that SETs are commonly used for monitoring in Germany and the UAE, in private Emirati and German universities for checking the continuity of contracts and, in private German ones, to report students, while Emirati students do not receive reports, despite their treatment as clients. Further, we elicited that SETs reproduce student-centeredness in all the visited universities in both countries, albeit to varying degrees. We conclude that SETs demonstrate the strength of rationalizing trends in higher education (HE). Moreover, nuances in the implementation of SET, which we relate to the protection of professors' autonomy in Germany and the cultural norm of respecting faculty as a highly regarded position in the UAE, remain related to the Humboldtian and tribal heritage of our studied countries, respectively.

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Introduction

Studying the implementation of student evaluation of teaching (SET) from a historical and comparative perspective allows us to ascertain whether evaluation practices that make the work of professors and lecturers accountable contest hierarchical social organization. The use of student opinion to evaluate lecturers and professors can be tracked historically to universities in the USA, which started to implement this procedure in

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the mid-seventies (Pineda & Seidenschur, 2021a, 2021b). Recent research has identified SET implementation in different regions of the world (Pineda & Steinhardt, 2020). Universities immersed in a hierarchical structure that invests professors with a position of power may inhibit students from openly giving opinions and criticism (Jackson, 2014). If students cannot exercise agency to express their voices and rights (see Lerch et al., 2017), it is possible that SET is not implemented or is just implemented in a perfunctory way. Alternatively, if SET spreads to all types of universities, then this trend would support neo-institutionalist arguments about isomorphic trends (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) in higher education (HE) (Frank & Meyer, 2020).

In this paper, we have three main objectives. First, we examine the procedures and content of the SET in 14 German and United Arab Emirates (UAE) universities, two countries with diverse histories and distinct cultural contexts. Second, we investigate whether diffusion of SET in the UAE supports the hypothesis of isomorphism of neo-institutional theory. It is particularly important for the UAE, where there has never been a regional analysis of SET. Third, we probe whether the implementation of SET also promotes or reflects a student-centered pedagogy that would indicate changes in traditional professor–student relations.

We aim to contribute to the discussion about the convergence occurring in contemporary universities throughout the world through exploring SET as a new evaluation procedure in higher education. We also explore the interaction of SET across pedagogical dimensions, with particular emphasis on student-centeredness. In the paper, we discuss the fact that data from Germany and the UAE indicate that rationalizing procedures and student-centeredness seem to be globalizing. We conclude with theoretical reflections on the influence and limits of cultural globalization to understand the institutionalization of evaluation practices in universities nowadays.

Theoretical framework

Isomorphism

The tendency to adopt similar procedures and approaches is known as convergence or isomorphism. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) distinguished analytically between coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. Under coercive isomorphism, organizations can become more similar because of legal mandates or incentives. Accreditation procedures are representative of such isomorphism in HE (Barrett, Fernandez, & Gonzalez, 2020). In higher education, common forces can influence administration processes or pedagogical practices in a similar direction, and we, therefore, differentiate between administrative and pedagogical isomorphism. Universities must continuously prove that they are establishing and reaching goals in their activities to maximize their resources (Kwak, Gavrila, & Ramirez, 2019; Krücken & Meier, 2006). With the increased interconnectedness of activities in universities in a global society, cross-national discussions on the standardization of university activities – including teaching – become possible. The incremental use of new control mechanisms and evaluative techniques in HE (Maroy, 2009) is but one form of the bureaucratization of modern societies, as hypothesized by Weber (1919/1930). In universities, rationalization has extended to teaching through the use of SET, despite critiques on the validity of its instruments (Stark et al., 2016; Wolbring & Riordan, 2016).

Student-centeredness

SET may also promote administrative isomorphism related to the adoption of similar evaluation procedures, in addition to pedagogical isomorphism pertaining to similar approaches to teaching and learning. We are especially interested in the potential impact of SET on student-centered pedagogy. We define student-centeredness as a pedagogical approach putting students at the center of education, rather than giving lecturers a leading role and control of classes. Within this approach, lecturers should provide students with the freedom to pursue their own interests with the least possible guidance (Bremner, 2021; Bromley, Meyer, & Ramirez, 2012). Student-centeredness emphasizes active participation, interaction, and adapting the curriculum to individual needs (Weimer, 2002/2013).

Methods

We investigated the institutionalization of SET through a comparative strategy, with a within-case analysis that also combines interviews and content analysis of evaluation forms.

Comparative strategy, method of similarity

Our aim was to compare HE within completely different historical trajectories, but where we knew SET has been implemented. On the one hand, the older German HE has a well-defined local and Humboldtian tradition, which gives students the role of apprentices in charge of their own intellectual and moral development under the supervision of an educated scientist (Meyer, 2016). The origin of the role of universities in the social elitist structure of the Bismarck era in Germany explains the hierarchy still present (Gellert, 1993). On the other hand, the universities in the UAE are very recent, the first university (United Arab Emirates University) being founded in 1976 following the foundation of the country in 1971 (Alsheikh, 2022).

Another major difference between both countries is the participation in public higher education. Private enrollment in the 133 private HEIs (out of a total of 401 HEI) only accounts for 5.6% (18,016) of the 2,435,626 students FTE enrolled in German higher education (European Tertiary Education Register, 2022). In the UAE, Emirati and non-Emirati students pay for their education in private and semi-private institutions, whereas in three public universities Emiratis (around 90% of the student population) are eligible to study without paying fees (Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2014). In the UAE, 66 private HEI (out of 100) enroll 98,000 students (Knowledge and Human Development Authority, 2022; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), representing 70% of the student population (data from 2020). Thirty-one international branch campuses enroll 28,166 students (13% of the total student population (QAA, 2017)).

Nevertheless, Germany and UAE also share similarities, in particular, a tradition of respect for social hierarchies in HE, which we thought could influence the ways in which SET is implemented. Its hierarchical structure can be traced to the protection it offered to the social elitist structure of the Bismarck era resembling and later institutionalized in institutes' governance (Gellert, 1993). On the other hand, concerning the UAE,

the country's tribal heritage has created subordinate relationships, high esteem for communal values, respect for the opinions of those located in the hierarchies of social organization, low levels of individualism, and high collectivism, that is, valuing the communal interests over those of individuals (Ridge, 2014). Richardson (2004) and Austin et al. (2014) added that the hierarchies in the Emirate society provide little space for open criticism and for the real implementation of student-centered pedagogies because the individual growth and self-realization they promote appear to contradict pre-established gender and social roles.

Within-case intensive analysis

We also combined our country comparison with within-case intensive analysis (Mahoney, 2000) of seven universities in each country representing typical cases in terms of public and private sectors, year of foundation and size, without knowing whether the selected universities were using SET. We selected public and private universities in Germany and in the UAE. We selected only one public (federal) university in the UAE because there are only three public universities comprising 30% (43,000 students) of total student enrollment; mostly 90% Emiratis (QAA, 2017, p. 6). In Germany, within the private universities, one (GU4) was funded by the German government and was not dependent on student fees. Private U5 has strong links with the local government and tuition is majorly supported by the government. Private U2 is an international branch campus we included in our cases to also explore this sector. Future research could also investigate with more detail how they are implemented in private universities or international branch campuses. SET and student-centeredness can be also studied in universities of applied sciences in the future.

Research methods

We used a mixed-methods design comprising two qualitative methods to collect information: interviews and content analysis of evaluation forms. A total of 16 interviews were conducted in the UAE and 15 in Germany. We selected experts in the procedures out of: (1) university professors in education or statistics; and (2) administrators who have conducted research on SET or participated in the design, analysis, or implementation of SET. Our selection of interviewees was based on a non-probability sample (Uprichard, 2013), because we were interested in obtaining a picture of each university and not in making generalizations among interviewees. We approached via email representative persons in typical universities of each country, who we searched for on the internet or who were referred by interviewees. There was not a fixed number of interviewees, but rather we interviewed in each university until we had enough insight of the trajectories of SET.

The personal and online interviews were conducted between October 2017 and January 2019 in Germany and October 2020 and January 2021 in the UAE. Before conducting interviews, the first author obtained ethics approval at the institute level, while the second author obtained the permission of the ethical review committee. Each participant and the institution's names were kept anonymous, with a code being used to identify the latter. Both the interviews and collected forms were analyzed through traditional

content analysis (Flick, 2018). We transcribed important passages of the interviews or the forms, first analyzing them individually and then at the level of the university.

We coded the data from the recorded interviews separately in German and Arabic. We could not double code the data, because we did not speak both languages, but did agree upon a set of pre-set codes together. New codes that emerged during the analysis (student satisfaction, low-high levels of student-centeredness) were mutually discussed and a consensus arrived at to ensure consistency. Regarding the evaluation forms, we analyzed the content and the number of questions implying student-centeredness following Weimer's (2002/2013) themes and statements. These include the emphasis towards providing students with feedback, student engagement, use of in-class assignments, students taking responsibility for their learning, peer-assessment and reflection on own learning. When coding, we agreed upon different degrees of thematization through counting the questions that involved student-centered categories. We then recoded the degree of student-centeredness according to the proportion of the form that had questions formulated under the understanding that the student was the major actor in the process. We considered low, medium and high emphasis regarding student-centeredness (0–10%, 11–20%, or 21% and above, respectively), according to the share of statements endorsing this pedagogical view.

Trajectories of SET

The interviews allowed us to define the trajectories of SET in terms of implementation, forces of implementation and uses of the procedure.

Implementation moments

The universities we visited implemented SET between 2001 and 2013. All the interviewees coincided in that the institutionalization of SET was a top-down process. While we did not find differences in the decades in which it was implemented, we did find them in terms of the scope of application: Emirati public and private universities and tuition-dependent private universities in Germany apply SET to all their courses (Table 1). SET as applied in the two countries represents an outstanding case of administrative isomorphism in countries with different educational influences.

Forces for implementation

Regarding the mechanism of implementation, we found distinctive national patterns. SET was implemented only after the revision of the German Higher Education Framework Law (Deutscher Bundestag, 1999, p. §6). The federal governments where the universities we visited are located further regulated the general guidelines for teaching evaluation (Bayern, 2006; Berlin, 2011; Hessen, 2009) under a section of 'quality assurance'. Universities, in turn, have integrated the evaluation in a new document entitled Evaluation Regulation (Evaluationssetzung) parallel to the courses of study (Studienordnung), created under the first Higher Education Framework Law (Deutscher Bundestag, 1976/2002). Furthermore, the federal government provided funds for establishing programs that improved teaching, including projects for the implementation of SET,

Table 1. Trajectories of SET in universities in Germany and the UAE.

	Germany	UAE
Educational influences	Humboldtian; vertical hierarchy historically traced to the chair structure with academics organized below the authority of a Professor	A mixture of practices influenced from abroad through academics and foreign education; hierarchy derived from tribal social organization
Starting SET implementation	2000–2013	2001–2011
Forces	Coercive and normative: HE framework law and regional HE laws; supported by the Quality Pact for Teaching (2011–2016 and 2016–2020). Mimetic: local universities	Coercive: CAA Standards for Licensure and Accreditation Mimetic: universities copying the oldest universities Normative: universities seeking international accreditation and consultation
Uses	In public universities, monitoring through implementation on some courses, but with a ritualistic character and no evidence of the use of feedback. In private universities, monitoring and in GU5 and GU6 results communicated to students	Monitoring through implementation for all courses, with no pressures for lecturers' active use of feedback. Legitimacy in front of students, but results not communicated to them. Control through use in the termination of contracts in U8 and U9
Administrative isomorphism	Questionnaire of circa 32 questions applied to some courses, except in the newest universities, where they are applied to all courses	Questionnaire of circa 18 questions applied to all courses in all universities accredited by the CAA
Pedagogical isomorphism	Student centrism in all universities and in the newest private ones in terms of the position of students as being clients	Student centrism, with less emphasis in U2 and U5

through the Quality Pact for Teaching (2011–2016 and 2016–2020). Funds could also be used for establishing temporary SET-related positions. The visited universities in Germany developed their own instruments, although GU2 adapted the modular structure of the Berlin Evaluation Instrument for the Self-assessment of Student Competences (Braun et al., 2008), which is one of the most popular standardized instruments for evaluation along with the Heidelberg Inventory for the Evaluation of Teaching developed by Rindermann and Amelang (1994).

In the UAE, SET has been similarly implemented in a hierarchal manner, laid down by the federal quality assurance body and translated into university procedures. The Commission for Academic Accreditation (CAA), part of the Ministry of Education established in 2001, is in charge of granting accreditation and licenses to operate (Lane, 2010). The use of SET was stipulated in the earliest version of the CAA standards (2001). According to the standards (2019), student evaluations of teaching are an element of the course files that are checked by a visiting external review team assigned by the ministry for program accreditation and institutional licensing purposes. All CAA-accredited higher education institutions are requested by the UAE Ministry of Education to carry out SET for each course for quality assurance and program reaccreditation or licensing purposes.

Only the interviewees in the administration at GU2 were aware of these broader institutional frameworks. The interviewees at GU2, GU3, and GU4 were concerned by the new evaluation statutes inside the universities regulating SET based on national and regional demand for involving students in the evaluation of teaching. The interviewees also reported the tendency to copy other universities: 'The background why we did it, I will simply say, it is because other universities started implementing them, so it was seen as a necessity, also in GU3'. Even if the interviewees recognized that SET should

be implemented, the principle of academic freedom was put forward against the implementation of SET in public universities GU1, GU2, and GU3. However, this was not mentioned in private universities. The interviewees from the private universities GU4, GU5, and GU6 also referred to the pivotal role that students play in the implementation of SET. G5 and GU6 used a managerial language that located the rationale for the implementation of SET in obtaining the ‘General satisfaction of the students as something everyone can see [in a report accessible to students at the end of the classes]’ (GU5) or ‘To satisfy our customers and to identify and meet their needs’ (administrator at GU6).

In the UAE, though there is no national rule that makes SET procedures mandatory and instead, the Ministry of Education encourages universities to adopt them through the program accreditation administered by the CAA. The standards for Institutional Licensure and Program Accreditation emphasize ‘the deliberate and systematic steps to gather feedback from students about the HEI’s educational provision’ (...) while ‘encouraging students to express their views in a constructive manner’ (CAA, 2019, p. 59).

An interviewee from U1 who had worked for over 30 years in different HEIs in the UAE confirmed that SET started in the early 2000s. This was the time that CAA standards 2001 were created (CAA, 2019). Accreditation became a strong isomorphic mechanism since institutions followed the same set of policies and procedures. All the universities we visited had implemented SET as part of their national accreditation, which explains the similarities among these universities in SET initiation and implementation. The emphasis on accreditation is also related to the administration of SET by quality assurance offices in all of our visited universities.

The interviewees further described the implementation of SET in connection with quality assurance. As a professor at U6 stated:

SET has an administrative and quality aspect, empowering students to have their say in the course design, teaching quality, and evaluation of learning resources. It is also used for improvement of teaching and to identify any gaps to be addressed in the course delivery.

In U8, a professor of education said that SET was being used for ‘quality check purposes’; to act if students had concerns. A professor of education at U7 reported: ‘First and foremost, in my own judgment, SET helps a great deal in improvement and control of teaching’. Older universities also seem to have influenced the course of implementation in newer ones. U1 and U5 had implemented SET before others, such as U2, U3, and U6, were founded, thus facilitating the transfer of procedures and practices from graduates of these older universities (U1 & U5).

The interviewees of U5, U6, U8, and U9 also explicitly indicated that establishing SET responded to the pressures from students. A dean and professor of education at U5 confirmed the importance of fulfilling students’ expectations, reporting that ‘students are the core of the university’s strategy’, and ‘everything in the university is planned around students’ desires and needs’. The dean stated that ‘all education processes and services are centered around students; students are evaluating teachers, services, colleges through satisfaction surveys’. Another interviewee at U7 also said that ‘the students’ satisfaction is the core of all our strategies’. A dean at U6 reported: ‘SETs are used to meet expectations and satisfaction of students as clients’.

Uses

In Germany, in both public and private universities SET was mainly linked to a limited use in monitoring of teaching within a broader evaluation system. At GU1, the person in charge said ‘SET does not yield very much and the data should be used in the faculties’ (GU1.1). At GU2, other sources of information (e.g., monitoring student enrollment decisions or dropout rates) were viewed as being more helpful for identifying problems and improving the curriculum. At GU3, SET was used, to some extent, in the evaluation of professors every five years, and the results were utilized in decision-making on additional research staff or equipment. In contrast, at private GU4, SET results were used as a main source of information for annual and mid-term teaching reports to the university administration.

SET was also intended to be used to give feedback to lecturers, but interviewees at public universities and GU4 considered that use depended on lecturers’ willingness to adopt them in the case of those with the status of civil servants. For lecturers under temporary contracts SET report scan views were used more pragmatically, as a tool for renewing their teaching contracts or for future applications. At private universities GU5 and GU6, SET were being used for terminating contracts of short-term lecturers: ‘If the lecturer does not achieve any positive results and the students are not satisfied, then we check whether we employ another lecturer’ (GU5.1). When the lecturers had a permanent contract, then coaches that should help improving teachings were considered.

SET are not only made accountable to the university leadership and colleagues but also to students who were informed about SET results. ‘One thought was always to collect the feelings, what are the expectations and needs of our students as our clients. (...). To ensure our clients are satisfied and to share and comply with this need’ (GU6.1). In a public meeting each semester, lecturers at GU6 with courses with low scores were expected to explain their improvement plans in front of student representatives and colleagues. At GU5, a representative of the quality assurance office personally read the report to students. Comments were also made available, but without the scores, allegedly due to concerns about data protection of information about lecturers, which could be private.

In the UEA, results were made available to university administrators and distributed to lecturers. Lecturers were not required by their universities to respond to students’ feedback in writing. However, this evaluation would be included in the course portfolio created by each lecturer at the end of the semester as part of the quality assurance procedures and as a requirement by CAA. SET was also used for taking decisions on dismissing faculty at U8 and U9. An interviewee at U1 challenged this practice and the statistical reliability of the questionnaire itself, whereas interviewees at U8 and U9 questioned the validity of SET as an accurate measure of instructional quality and the possible role of grades in influencing SET’s scores.

Students in the UAE could not use the results of the evaluation system to decide to study certain subjects or enroll in the classes offered by specific instructors. Thus, they relied mainly on word-of-mouth in selecting a lecturer. A professor at U1 criticized this secrecy: ‘We are never going to do it right, if we are not going to be accountable to the student’. A director of a quality assurance office in U9 said: ‘We are accountable

to our stakeholders and students are one of these'. But an interviewee from U9 explained that students did not receive the results nor demanded receiving them. None of the universities we visited shared with students full or summarized reports of the scores they received.

Students-centeredness in the evaluation forms

A common feature of all the evaluation forms we analyzed was a minimal level of emphasis on student-centeredness (Table 2). We encountered statements in regard to elements of student-centeredness described by Weimer (2002/2013): statements referring to student engagement, students taking responsibility for their learning and reflection on own learning. Evaluation forms were, on average, longer in Germany: 32 against 18 questions in the UAE.

In Germany, at GU1, the instrument was formally centered in university didactics that promoted, implicitly and explicitly, a student-centered pedagogy by asking if 'the lecturer was willing to listen to suggestions of the students' in a section called 'learner centeredness'. The modular form of GU2 included questions with varying degrees of student-centeredness. The possibility provided to lecturers in selecting questions, the results of which they received at the end of the evaluation, implies a great extent of teacher-centeredness. This aspect relied on the pedagogical emphasis that the instructor decided to put in the class and in the evaluation.

In the questions that most clearly provided voice to the students among the evaluation forms we collected, student-centeredness was explicit in open questions where students could suggest topics, literature, and theories. GU4, in turn, emphasized student-centeredness through inquiring about the lecturer's 'friendliness' and 'helpfulness' toward the student, alongside the promotion of students' 'interest' and the 'benefit of the teaching content'.

As for GU5, through prioritizing the perspective of the student and relying on the evaluation of the course exclusively in the activities of the lecturer, the instrument was implicitly student-centered. In GU6, in turn, most of the questionnaire was based on didactic principles related to the 'structure of the course and the teaching materials'

Table 2. Emphasis of evaluation forms in Germany and the UAE.

Demographics		Emphasis of the evaluation form		Questions
Case	Sector	Title of the evaluation form	Number of questions in which there was an emphasis on student-centeredness	
GU1	Pr	Course evaluation	17 (30%): high	56
GU2	Pu	Student course evaluation	4 (17%): medium	24
GU3	Pu	Student survey	5 (42%): high	12
GU4	Pu	Student course evaluation	4 (10%): low	41
GU5	Pr	Student course evaluation	8 (44%): high	18
GU6	Pr	Lecturer and seminar evaluation	2 (5%): low	38
U1	Pu	Course evaluation survey	4 (20%): medium	20
U2	Pr	Student course evaluation	2 (10%): low	20
U3	Pr	Faculty evaluation	3 (20%): medium	15
U4	Pr	Course evaluation survey	1 (14%): medium	7
U5	Pr	Student course evaluation	2 (15%): low	20
U7	Pr	Instructor and course evaluation survey	4 (20%): medium	20
U8	Pr	Instructor and course evaluation	4 (20%): medium	20

and the 'engagement and competence of the lecturer'. A student-centered approach was implicit in the formulation of the questions referring to the capacity of the lecturer to 'motivate' and 'refer to the project contents of the students'. In this context, 'project' pertained to the classroom projects within a student-centered approach known as project-based learning.

Evaluation forms in the UAE (except U3 and U4) were usually divided into two parts, one evaluating the instructor and the other evaluating the course. In both parts, the positioning of students' learning was at the center of the process. In U1, this appeared in evaluative statements on the lecturer's capacity to engage students. The form asked if the lecturer 'encouraged' students '(...) to ask questions, participate and raise their interest in the course subject', '(...) independent and critical thinking', or 'provide clear and constructive feedback on assessment tasks'. U3 explicitly asked about the capacity of the lecturers' 'student-centeredness'. U4 had a noticeably short questionnaire that still asked in the first person about the capacity of the instructor to 'motivate me to learn' and whether 'the course lived up to my learning desires'. Didactic principles were at the base of U7 and U8's evaluation forms, which differentiated between the content of the course and the competence of the lecturer. Students evaluated if the lecturer could 'motivate', would 'give examples', and 'make them interested in the course'.

U2 and U5 had a comparably lower emphasis on student-centeredness in their forms. At U2, a branch campus of an international university, the emphasis was on didactics and pedagogy. The questionnaire was based on didactic principles, such as 'content of the course and the teaching materials', 'the effective use and communication of syllabus and course learning outcomes', 'assessment and grading' and the competence and communication of the students. Moreover, the U2 form had three questions about instructors' abilities to stimulate students' ideas, the lecturers' feedback to students, and responding to students' questions. Other questions that implicated student-centeredness were 'the course is supported with enough illustrations' and the students were 'motivated to learn' and 'encouraged to ask questions'. As for U5, many questions were focused on the lecturer, without much reference to any engagement of students. The interviewees also raised the position that learning and motivation played in the educational philosophy at U5.

Discussion

Common implementation

Our main finding is that SET is a common procedure in universities in Germany and the UAE, both those with a tradition of hierarchical social organization and completely different histories (Table 1). This was an unexpected finding, because we initially assumed that German professors with power derived from their positions as chairs or institute directors (Gellert, 1993; Meyer, 2016) or the Emirati university administration resilient against critique from students (Austin et al., 2014) would impede the transfer of SET to all universities. However, the same administrative ritual of presenting a survey to students at the end of the academic period with questions that use metrics to measure teaching was repeated in all the universities we visited. This evaluation form, though, is not the only imaginable form of evaluation: class visits or standardized tests of basic knowledge could have been other direct measurements of courses' efficacy. SET was

established in HE with completely different histories and in a short lapse of time of 10 years despite different existing possibilities to evaluate teaching.

Overlapping isomorphic forces

Our second finding is that the three kinds of isomorphism, namely coercive, normative, and mimetic, are present during the institutionalization of SET, but with different weights in each country. German universities implement SET, because regulatory norms oblige them to apply evaluations of teaching involving students (Deutscher Bundestag, 1976/2002, p. §6), though translating this mandate into SET is discretionary. Germany also has regional HE laws (e.g., Bayern, 2006, §10; Hessen, 2009; Berlin, 2011), often supported by government funding programs, such as the Quality Pact for Teaching in the case of GU1 and GU3. The interviewees also reported an explicit attempt to emulate the evaluation of other universities, which corresponds to mimetic isomorphism. The presence of standardized evaluation questionnaires in Germany, such as the Berlin Evaluation Instrument Competences (Braun et al., 2008) used by GU2, or the Heidelberg Evaluation of Teaching (Rindermann & Amelang, 1994), provide evidence that universities may observe each other's practices to implement SET once receiving the mandate to evaluate teaching. In Germany, the inspiration to use SET in other universities seems to be more local. Accreditation in Germany, in turn, has not preceded SET, contrary to the UAE where it is highly valued (Badri et al., 2006; Dodeen, 2013). Accreditation does not have a high degree of legitimacy in the perception of the public and scholars (Schneijderberg & Steinhardt, 2018), contrary to the UAE, where it is highly valued (Badri et al., 2006; Dodeen, 2013).

In the UAE, SET is implemented mostly through measures that represent normative isomorphism. The central government decided to promote its implementation indirectly through an accreditation process, which was known to create normative pressure on universities willing to receive federal recognition. The implementation of SET in the UAE is enacted through a central norm that is part of CAA's procedures for institutions seeking national accreditation (CAA, 2019). Within this mixture of hierarchical organization and evaluation rituals, students hardly ever see their evaluation results. In fact, it is an uncommon practice for a university to share results with the students. Hence, if used, SET results are more relevant for internal use by universities than for students.

The acceptance of accreditation procedures common in other locales is related to the international orientation of HE in the UAE, as represented by a majority of academics from abroad and the presence of international campuses (Austin et al., 2014). Moreover, U1 and U5 could inspire reforms in other newer universities that were born in a context of relatively new institutions (U2, U3, and U6) by possibly extending the implementation of SET across universities. U2, an international campus, is not an exception to the implementation of SET. As with others, it seeks national accreditation from CAA to operate and is, thus, expected to implement SET.

Different uses

A third key finding is in the uses of SET and their relation to the traditions of both studied countries. The external coercive and normative pressures that brought

German universities to institutionalizing SET and the coercive and mimetic mechanisms bringing SET to Emirati universities reveal that pedagogical uses for improvement of pedagogy were not named in the first place. Instead, monitoring and building of internal reports without certainty about the internal uses of the collected feedback is the most common norm.

However, SET also has different uses. In private universities GU4 and GU5, it was distributed to students together with language about satisfaction and the service provided by lecturers that homologates students with clients. Here, lecturers working under a fixed-term contract aspiring to get a stable one with the university had to present their evaluation forms under the parameters of student-centeredness. The role of students as clients does not appear to be present in German public universities nor the oldest private one, because it is less compatible with the lesser hierarchical place of students in relation to the professors in German HE, which also has not been affected by the payment of the tuition fees, abolished since 2008 (Hüther & Krücken, 2014). Because GU1 and GU2 (categorized as Universities of Excellence) allow lecturers to build their own surveys, this shows that the aim is not to provide measurable and comparable results in the face of students' or university leaders' wishes nor to challenge the tradition of academic freedom.

Providing feedback for lecturers was not identified as an explicit use of SET. The shorter version of the surveys in the UAE (18 questions against 32 questions on average in Germany) and the very short survey of U4, further exemplifies this use of SET for legitimizing the university in front of students and external auditors. The delivery of results to lecturers in Germany and the application to selected courses (either one course per lecturer, core courses, or all courses every three years), but not in the UAE, also reveals that the rationale of implementation is not just pedagogical, but also administrative, concerning quality assurance and service orientation. The priority is to show that courses and lecturers are continuously updated, which does not permit the adaption of the instruments applied over a longer period to better track the changes in pedagogy.

In the UAE, universities did use SET to take decisions about terminating contracts. That is, it was an instrument to control the contract situation of faculty members that added to the insecure labor conditions described in detail by Austin et al. (2014). At the lowest level of the hierarchy, where emirate university leaders were on top, was an expatriate faculty contracted under a less stable scheme. The hierarchical relationship with students in a dominant position could be explained by the wider social structure of society, which is reproduced by the short-term nature of the contractual relationships of the majority of academic staff, which is also foreign. The use of evaluations collecting students' opinions for the renewal of contracts also indicates the role of students as clients.

Notably, Emirate universities did not share the results of evaluations with students. The lack of distribution of results in universities conceiving students as their clients indicates that SET is considered as imparting to students a sense that their paid courses are being made accountable by the university administration. However, the role of students collides with a hierarchical social structure that does not facilitate sharing information collected by the university administration to students.

This trajectory in a society originating from tribal social relationships explains the paradox of a procedure that is said to serve students, but where they are not totally

involved in all the steps. Here, SET ends up becoming a routine to demonstrate commitment towards quality and the rational use of resources from tuition fees under a narrative of students as clients, whose role is not full in terms of having rights to receive evaluation scores. The relationship we found between quality assurance and the use of SET scores in the UAE contrasts to their open publication in private universities in Germany.

Similar promotion of student-centeredness

A fourth key contribution is in showing that the new evaluation procedures reflect and reproduce understandings of teaching, learning, and the role of students. SET occurs under the influence of a global culture that promotes the rationalization of teaching and also considers the agency of students. The conception that students and their opinions are consulted regularly is so powerful that, even hierarchical societies and universities, such as those in Germany and the UAE, distribute periodical surveys to students to learn about the capacities of lecturers to enhance their learning and motivation.

Proof of this relationship is that none of the forms we analyzed expressed a completely traditional teacher-centered view of teaching that entirely omitted a conception of students as active learners and the role of lectures as facilitators. In Germany, the presence of student-centeredness is hardly surprising given the Humboldtian conception of learning that gives students some control over their own intellectual and moral development, with supervision (Meyer, 2016). This relationship was found to be rather more institutionalized in seminars and research practices than in lectures. But our findings on student-centeredness in the forms of lectures, without any distinction of the type of frontal teaching that lectures tend to privilege, imply that isomorphic pressures through SET in standardizing types of course delivery.

Conclusion

In conclusion, SET displays administrative and pedagogical isomorphism along with the diffusion of increasing rationalization and the role of students as empowered learners and, in some cases, clients with total or limited rights to receive reports. SET seems to be often considered as being compatible with student-centeredness and when implemented for all courses (more so when results are distributed to the students), reflects and promotes the concept of students as clients being accounted for their educational investment. This position is different to the one of a mentor, a facilitator or a coach (Emerson & Mansvelt, 2013). However, the fact that German students at public universities and Emirati students do not access their results demonstrates local variations. There are concerns for the protection of the autonomy of professors in Germany, whereas in the context of the UAE's tribal heritage control decision-making is left unchallenged to the university's administration and leaders (Austin et al., 2014; Richardson, 2004). This practice has been uncovered in previous findings of Emirati higher education, where students are socialized to take control of their own learning, but open criticism is not endorsed and evaluation scores remain the property of the higher authorities of the government and the university.

Our explanation of the diffusion of SET aligns with previous studies on the diffusion of administrative practices in HE (Baltaru, 2019; Krücken, 2003; Oertel, 2018) and

pedagogical ideas, such as student-centeredness (Komatsu, Rappleye, & Silova, 2021) and the managerialization of student–lecturer relationships (Tight 2013; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016). However, we contribute to this discussion through showing how rationalizing teaching *and* providing students with agency to participate actively and share their opinions about this participation, often in the role of clients, are widely imagined together in the form of SET. Future studies could continue to examine other vehicles of diffusion of new evaluation devices that might be reflecting and pressuring administrative and pedagogical changes in terms of the role of students as well as the traditional relationships between students and lecturers.

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