

What kind of actor is 'policy' in higher education research?

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research that examines the ways in which policies position the terms of particular educational debates. Such approaches highlight the ways in which policies offer particular, contestable, versions of what the world of higher education is like. In this paper, we are focused on the ways in which higher education policies are positioned in research into higher education. Based on an analysis of journal articles that were published in 2011, we argue that the positioning of policies in higher education research can result in a tendency to treat them as actors which structure the practices of those working in higher education in a direct and unmediated way. We explore the implications of our analysis and question whether policy research into higher education positions practitioners as largely powerless in the face of policy.

Introduction

A significant proportion of higher education research is focused on examining policy (Tight 2004). Recently, there has been increased attention given to the focus of higher education policy research (Tight 2004); the different approaches that are taken to understanding policy change (Saarinen and Ursin 2012); as well as the different approaches that are taken to analysing policy texts in higher education research (Saarinen 2008). Related to this, there is a growing body of research that examines the ways in which policies position the terms of particular educational debates, often through their accounts of what the world is like, how it should be transformed and what this transformation will lead to (see for example, Ball 1994, 2008; Ozga 2000; Saarinen 2008; Saarinen and Ursin 2012). Such approaches highlight the ways in which policies relating to higher education offer particular, contestable, versions of what the world of higher education is like.

In this paper, we approach the relations between policies and higher education research from a different angle. Our question is focused on the ways in which higher education policies are positioned in research into higher education. Thus we are trying to get a sense of how policy is constructed as an actor in higher education research. We did this by analysing journal articles that were published in 2011

Methodological approach

We examined three kinds of journals in our analysis. These were the six general higher education journals that were identified by Tight (2007) as the leading North American and non-North American higher education journals (Higher Education, Higher Education Research & Development, Journal of Higher Education, Research in Higher Education, Review of Higher Education, Studies in Higher Education); four specialist higher education policy journals (Higher Education Management and Policy, Higher Education Quarterly, Higher Education Policy, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management); and five general education policy journals (Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, Educational Policy, European Journal of Education, Journal of Education Policy, Policy Studies).

We took the issues from these 15 journals that were published in 2011 and identified those journal articles that explicitly focused on higher education policy in some form. We then

analysed these articles to examine the focus of the policy/ies that were discussed in the article, the ways in which the policy/ies were used in the article, the ways in which they were analysed, and the outcomes of the ways in which the policy/ies were used in the article. In undertaking this analysis our focus was on the ways in which the policies were positioned in the articles. For example, did they provide the background context for the article or were they analysed in some depth and, if so, in what ways were they analysed? In doing so, we sought to understand the different ways in which policies were positioned as actors in higher education research.

In order to ascertain inter-coder reliability across the fifteen journals, we initially analysed the articles in three of the journals (one from each category) independently and compared our analyses to ensure that we were selecting the same articles for analysis and analysing them in congruent ways. After each of these first three analyses, we discussed the ways in which we were conducting the analysis. Once we were happy that we were selecting the same articles and analysing them in congruent ways, we then split the remaining journal articles between us.

Provisional Outcomes

At the time of writing (June 2012) our analysis of the journal articles is still ongoing, therefore these comments should be seen as highly provisional at this stage. At the moment our analysis seems to be suggesting two broad ways in which policies are positioned within journal articles relating to higher education. The most common way is to use them as a way of situating and providing a context for the research that is the focus of the journal articles. In these cases, including those articles that explicitly identify themselves as undertaking policy analysis, there is very little analysis of actual policy documents but more of a general discussion of the intentions of particular policy frameworks. Second, there is a related tendency in the journal articles to uncritically treat written policies as if they have a direct impact on actual day-to-day higher education practices. When these two ways of positioning policy come together they can result in a tendency to treat policies as an actor which structures the practices of those working in higher education in a direct and unmediated way. This can have the implication of positioning practitioners as largely powerless against such policies. However, these outcomes are still provisional. In the full paper they will be more fully developed and explored in more detail along with their potential implications.

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