

Connections between the global-national-local in curriculum, teaching and learning in HE (0153)

Paul Ashwin<sup>1</sup>, Rachel Sweetman<sup>0</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lancaster University, UK,

<sup>2</sup>University of Oslo, Norway

### **Abstract**

Recently there have been a number of movements to develop global measures of the quality of curriculum, learning and teaching in higher education. UMultirank, the OECD's AHELO project, as well as numerous global rankings of universities attempt to provide global comparisons of teaching quality. However, in many ways, university teaching is a particularly local process because it involves particular students engaging with particular bodies of knowledge in particular settings. This tension between the global measurement of a local phenomenon presents a number of challenges for existing attempts to capture teaching quality. In this paper, we will explore alternative approaches to global comparison that takes seriously the local nature of university teaching.

### **Paper outline**

In discussions of the quality of teaching in higher education, there is a stark contrast between the local world of particular teaching and learning interactions and the global world of international measures of the quality of teaching in higher education.

Whilst much is known about the principles of curriculum design and pedagogy that support high quality student learning in higher education (for example see David 2009; Ashwin et al. 2015), we know far less about how to develop meaningful international comparisons of the quality of university teaching.

*What are the meanings of the local-national-global and the relations between them?*

In this paper, we will argue that the meaning of the quality of curriculum, teaching and learning changes when we move from considering the local quality of particular degree programme, to the national level of a particular higher education system, to global comparisons of higher education systems. The challenge is that the quality of an overall national system is not simply the aggregate of the quality of the individual institutions.

*What are the challenges of the relations between the local-national-global?*

Starting from a discussion of the limited insights international rankings offer on teaching or programme quality, we briefly examine some alternative attempts to assess and compare quality internationally that have more of a teaching focus than traditional

rankings. The paper builds on and brings together existing research on the limitations and influence of international comparison, along with research on teaching enhancement and the key features supporting learning and understanding at the degree level.

The paper acknowledges there are numerous and valid demands for greater transparency about what universities offer to students and society. However, we argue that rankings, and recent approaches to compare degree quality or outcomes, lack validity as ways of comparing the learning that takes place in universities or teaching quality. They fail to engage with crucial aspects of higher education; the transformational potential of higher education and students' engagement with disciplinary knowledge (Ashwin 2015).

We highlight the documented or likely undesirable influences of these comparison initiatives, such as institutional gaming of the most easily adjusted areas of practice to enhance results without significant changes in quality (Hazelkorn, 2014). These approaches to comparison also persistently neglect the limited influence HE actually has on items often used as proxies of quality, such as employment and earning outcomes (Marginson, 2015). Instead, these approaches rely on the most easily available, rather than the most valid proxies (Cave et al, 1997) and combine these measures in opaque ways (Boulton, 2011). Students' engagement with disciplinary and professional knowledge is either weakly assessed or absent, and replaced by generic skills or student satisfaction measures. Thus such approaches fail to draw on the evidence provided by close-up studies of teaching and learning in higher education nor do they provide any insight into the epistemic justice offered by different programmes.

#### *What possibilities do these relations present?*

We argue that what is special about higher education is the personal relationship that students develop with disciplinary and professional knowledge. It is these relationships, which lead to the transformative aspects of higher education highly valued by students, governments and societies (Ashwin 2014). Based on the challenges identified, an alternative, more meaningful institutional comparison would need to have the following characteristics:

- Be focused at the level of particular disciplines and professional fields within institutions;
- are measures of the quality of teaching offered by institutions rather than measures of institutional prestige;
- require improvements in teaching practices in order to improve performance on the measures;
- as a whole form a coherent set of metrics rather than a set of disparate measures;
- are based on established research evidence about high quality teaching and learning in higher education;
- reflect the purposes of higher education.

In order to make global comparisons, we will argue that we cannot simply aggregate this measure of quality to a national level. Rather, global comparisons should focus on the quality of teaching and learning within national system as a whole. We will explore what a high quality national system of curricula, teaching and learning in higher education looks like.

This paper offers a concrete contribution to ongoing debates and the potential for more empirical work investigating the benefits and limitations of differing approaches to comparison. The existing body of empirical work on teaching quality, and what leads to students developing knowledge during their degrees, is under-utilised in efforts to assess and compare quality and performance. We argue for changes in how rankings data is utilised and interpreted, while presenting an alternative that would offer more valid insights into teaching quality. This could help policy makers and students better understand variation across degrees and be helpful to educational developers and institutional managers in identifying where improvement is needed.

## References

- Ashwin, P. (2014). Knowledge, curriculum and student understanding in higher education. *Higher Education*, 67(2), 123-126.
- Ashwin, P. (2015). Missionary zeal: some problems with the rhetoric, vision and approach of the AHELO project. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 5, 437-444.
- Ashwin, P. and Boud, D., Coate, K., Hallet F., Leibowitz, B., Keane, E., Krause, K., MacLaren, I., McArthur, J., McCune, V., Tooher, M. (2015). *Reflective Teaching in Higher Education*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Boulton, G. (2011). University Rankings: Diversity, Excellence and the European Initiative. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 13, 74–82.
- Cave, M., Hanney, S., & Henkel, M. (Eds.). (1997). *The Use of Performance Indicators in Higher Education: The Challenge of the Quality Movement*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- David, M. (2009) *Effective Learning and Teaching in UK Higher Education*. London: Teaching and Learning Research Programme.
- Hazelkorn, E. (2014). Reflections on a Decade of Global Rankings: what we've learned and outstanding issues. *European Journal of Education*, 49(1), 12–28.
- Marginson, S. (2015, December). SRHE conference, 9 December 2015. *Rethinking education, work and "employability": Foundational problems of human capital theory*. Keynote presented at the SRHE Conference, Newport, UK.