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In this paper, an overview of higher education research in Latin America is offered. Drawing on MacFarlane's (2012) intuitive archipelago of higher education and other literature on the topic (Khem, 2015; Tight, 2012, 2003; MacFarlane & Grant, 2012; Teichler, 2005, 2000) and through an empirical study that analysed papers by Latin-American authors between 2000 and 2015, this paper aims to examine the main trends in higher education research in the region as well as to discuss the main challenges ahead.

Although higher education research is a relatively new area of study, it has been developing for fifty years, especially in countries in the North (Khem, 2015; Tight, 2012, 2003; MacFarlane 2012; Brunner, 2009; Teichler, 2005, 2000). Higher education is a hybrid area of study that draws on several disciplines mainly in the social sciences and the humanities. The literature shows that academic work usually follows a more theory or a more practice-oriented pattern, the latter pattern usually being focused on teaching and learning and system policy (MacFarlane 2012; Tight, 2003). One of the aims of this paper is to examine whether research in higher education in Latin-America exhibits this pattern.

In Latin-America, academic production in higher education has been slowly emerging over the past decade. However, there are few researchers devoted to the area, and a low research output in mainstream journals. According to Brunner (2009), research in higher education follows a pattern imported from countries in the North. Although Brunner's work was pioneering in addressing 'the sociology of higher education' in Latin-America, his work was rather descriptive and lacked a firm research basis. An aim of this paper is to address this gap.

Methodology

Several searches on the topics 'higher education', 'university education' and 'tertiary education' in the Web of Science (WoS) database – a well-recognised database that includes the references of the main scientific publications of any discipline of knowledge – were conducted. Specifically, the search included the Science Citation Index, the Expanded and Social Sciences Citation Index and the Arts & Humanities Citation Index across the categories 'education & educational research', 'education special', 'education scientific disciplines'

and ‘psychology educational’. 130 papers published in Latin-American countries between 2000 and 2015 were identified.

Results and discussion

Results show that, from 2010 onwards, there was an increase in the number of publications with a range of 12 to 19 papers produced per year. Chile and Brazil occupy the leading places in the region with 40 and 37 papers, respectively. Most of the papers were published in English (97%) and most of the papers are empirical (62.31%).

When viewed against the MacFarlane archipelago, higher education research in Latin-America exhibits a slightly different configuration in terms both of the teaching and learning island and the policy island. Outcomes show that, according to Tight categories (2003, 2012), most of the papers correspond to ‘teaching and learning’ (26.15%) and ‘system policy’ (14.62%). On adding the themes ‘course design’ (13.08%) and ‘the student experience’ (10.77%) to ‘teaching and learning’, it is possible to say that the teaching and learning island accounts for 50% of the research. Also, in adding ‘quality’ (5.38%) to ‘system policy’, this land accounts only for 19.98% of the papers.

Tight’s theme	Frequency	% out of total
Teaching and Learning	34	26.15%
System Policy	19	14.62%
Course Design	17	13.08%
Institutional Management	17	13.08%
The Student Experience	14	10.77%
Knowledge and Research	12	9.23%
Academic Work	10	7.69%
Quality	7	5.38%

Table 1: Publications organized by categories proposed by Tight (Tight, 2012, 2003)

Accordingly, ‘teaching and learning’ stands as the most important area of research in higher education research and so – in a Macfarlane map for Latin America – would constitute a much larger island than that of the ‘policy’ island. This might be explained by that fact that most of the universities in the region are teaching-oriented universities with their main missions being focused on education (this is the case of the majority of new private universities in the region). It might also be explained by the massification of the higher education system across the region and the need to teach to larger and diverse groups of students (with diverse backgrounds), low completion rates and dropouts. These trends might also explain why ‘system policy’ receives some research attention.

A topic that also receives attention is ‘institutional management’, which might be explained by the fact that higher education institutions have been growing in the region and have become more complex, a matter warranting research. Lastly, the topic ‘academic work’ seems to have some weight in this research endeavour, something that might also be confirmed by the production of other types of academic production not covered by the Web of Science (such as books or papers in other databases).

Conclusion

A configuration of higher education research in the Latin-American is evident which differs from that compared to that one proposed by Macfarlane. Similarly to Macfarlane’s personal map, research in higher education in Latin America is focused on practical problems attached to ‘teaching and learning’ and ‘policy system’. However, this region departs from that map in that most of the research is located in the former area.-

It also appears that the archipelago of higher education research is not well-endowed in terms of ‘isles’, ‘reefs’ authors and other ‘geographical accidents’; that kind of diversity is not evident. However, higher education research is growing faster in the region and there are increasing numbers of academics with PhDs in higher education. It might be predicted, therefore, that in ten years’ time the territory will be quite different and much more complex.

Relevant to such matters is the predominance of English as the main language of publication in mainstream journals and the database used here. Also, a related matter is that of the type of theory that academics in the South use to guide their research into higher education and whether or not this theory is produced or not in the region or is rather imported from outside the region.

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