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## **Judging the quality of higher education from a firm basis in reality**

### **Abstract**

The collation of an evidence base represents a central means by which judgments are made as to the adequacy of higher education provision. Earlier critical realist critiques of the basis on which systematic reviews assemble evidence to support judgements about practice or policy, however, can be extended to current approaches to judging the quality of HE provision. The paper argues that it is important to take into account the range of purposes that higher education can serve when assembling evidence to support judgments about the quality of provision, as well as understanding of the causal mechanisms affecting desired outcomes. Analysis of uses of the survey instrument on the destinations of leavers from HE is employed to illustrate the argument. While differences in the ontological commitments of researchers will affect the way in which critical realist arguments are received, the present study nonetheless problematises current means employed to judge provision.

Theme: Higher Education policy

### **Introduction**

The gathering of evidence represents a central feature of the means by which policy makers, institutional leaders and others now seek to make judgements on the adequacy of higher education provision. This is evident, for instance, in the Teaching Excellence Framework, which seeks to measure teaching quality in the UK on the basis of survey instruments and metrics (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015). We have seen increasing use of metric systems to rate the quality of academics themselves, as Ball (2012) has argued.

It is important, however, to maintain a critical attitude towards the way in which evidence is marshalled in making judgements. Barnett (2016) argued that an economic framing now dominates higher education across the world. If audit regimes or policy initiatives are not to negate important purposes to higher education, however, it is important that researchers are able to illuminate the basis on which judgements are made.

### **Methodology**

This paper employs a theoretical argument to critique the way in which evidence is assembled to make judgements on the quality of higher education provision. It builds on research that is linked to the paradigm of critical realism, including work by Clegg (2005) and Archer (1995). Critical realism offers a wide-ranging account of human-being-in-nature (Hartwig, 2007), one that is predicated on the identification of causal tendencies as they play out within given contexts. The paradigm, however, also has a strong emancipatory dimension. A theoretical understanding of the causal mechanisms which may or may not be triggered in given situations is essential if one is to understand how undesired sources of domination operate (Bhaskar, 1993). The paper seeks to problematise judgments about the quality of provision, and to point towards a set of theoretical resources that could assist in addressing the issues that are raised.

### **The nature of evidence**

Pawson (2002) suggested that the movement for evidence-based policy prioritised the use of systematic reviews and meta-analysis without paying due attention to their ontological basis.

Furthermore, Clegg (2005) argued in critiquing the use of systematic reviews in higher education that it is helpful to draw on the emancipatory dimension to critical realism in this critique, and not simply its analysis of the nature of causal mechanisms. Pawson (2002) downplayed this dimension in his own critique. For instance, the introduction of personal development planning across UK higher education was based in significant part on a systematic review, but Clegg (2004) argued that the review failed to acknowledge the complexities inherent in such planning, to the extent that ‘formulaic simulacra of reflection’ were likely to emerge from the attempt to improve the purposive orientation of human capital for a flexible labour market.

### **Beyond a partial view**

The line of reasoning employed by Clegg (2005) in judging the adequacy of the evidence bases assembled through a systematic review, however, applies more widely. There is scope for critical realist analysis to illuminate how survey instruments, metrics, and potentially also big data analytics provide a basis on which to judge the quality of higher education provision. For instance, data from the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education survey is currently being used by the Teaching Excellence Framework (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2016) for two of the key metrics involved in judging the quality of UK universities, namely an employment or further study metric, and a highly-skilled employment or further study metric.

While outcomes that relate to employment or further study are clearly relevant to the quality of provision, a data-set with such a narrow focus provides a partial view on which to make judgements about provision. Other purposes to higher education beyond enhancement of the employability of students are downplayed, whether the extent to which higher education assists in contributions to civic society through dedication on the part of students to cultural commitments (XXX, 2009), local communities (Abbott-Chapman, 2011), social movements (Goodwin & Jasper, 2009), social justice (Archer, 2012) and so on. For instance, Abbott-Chapman (2011) argued that young people in remote rural settings seek to reconcile engagement in higher education and employment with the maintenance of tight-knit social networks. If, as Case (2015) argued, the primary purpose of higher education is to allow for the morphogenesis of agency (Archer, 1995) on the part of students, that is for elaboration of the form taken by a student’s agency, then the emancipatory function of higher education is restricted through the use of such a limited range of metrics.

What is more, survey instruments and metrics provide a strictly limited basis on which to substantiate the role of an institution in influencing employment outcomes – considered attention to the causal mechanisms in play is essential if such a claim is to be sound. Brown and Hesketh (2004), indeed, have suggested that, with an over-supply of qualified graduates, soft currencies are essential in securing highly-skilled employment. These currencies are strongly influenced by social structures beyond the institution. While the Teaching Excellence Framework has made adjustments to its use of metrics in order to account for the nature of the student body at a given institution, the attempt remains partial. There is scope to draw in making judgments on the insights into causal mechanisms developed from a critical realist perspective, whether considering the role of social relations in high quality provision that supports students in placing a commitment to their studies within a wider configuration of commitments (XXX, 2017) or the way in which higher education enables students to develop the corporate agency that enables agents to draw together to advance mutual interests that effect social change (Archer, 1995).

### **Conclusions**

Tensions clearly exist between longstanding purposes to higher education and the introduction of measures to prepare students for the workplace. While those who hold anti-realist views are unlikely to be convinced by critical realist theorising (Clegg, 2005), the present study has nonetheless highlighted a range of issues with the current means employed to make judgments about the quality of higher education.

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