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How do universities interpret learning environment? (0231)

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HEIs' perspectives on learning environments: the missing piece in the literature

Learning environment has become a key subject in higher education policies and research. In a comprehensive review of the literature on learning environment in higher education by Abualrub *et al.,* 2013, they reported the following main results:

First, the focus on this subject within HE is strongly linked to developments of massification, internationalization and globalization. Due to the increase in the number and diversity of students, HEIs have attempted to create learning environments that are equally supportive to all students regardless of their backgrounds. Additionally, with the emergence of ideas such as 'knowledge economies' and 'knowledge societies', HEIs are expected to develop learning environments that can (i) compete globally for talented students and researchers, and (ii) encourage national citizens to engage in lifelong learning. The emphasis on this subject is further based on the belief that improved learning environments lead to improved learning outcomes.

Second, the review identified three main lenses through which the concept of learning environment has been defined and researched. The first lens sees learning environment as connected to pedagogical issues, including how teaching is conducted, and how curricula and study programs are designed and developed. The second lens focuses on the organizational and administrative arrangements needed to support teaching and learning activities, and their associated resources and facilities. The thirds lens looks at the networking opportunities offered to students for establishing and engaging in academic and social networks. A cross cutting theme is the importance of employing advanced technologies in teaching and learning and addressing student diversity.

Finally, although HEIs have been held responsible for providing good learning environments, their perspective on this subject has rarely been investigated. Much of the research has relied on learners' perceptions and often ignored the perspective of the institutions where learning is taking place. Therefore, the author is conducting a research project that examines (Norwegian) universities' interpretation of learning environment as higher education intuitions. The next section provides a tentative theoretical framework for investigating the logics that inform universities' approaches to learning environments, based on an institutional perspective. The three categories of academic, administrative, and strategic logics are suggested as analytical focal points for investigating how HEIs interpret this concept.

Academic logics

Many studies, including Clark, 1987, Becher, 1994; Maassen, 1996; Meyer *et al.,* 2005; Fry, 2009 and Stensaker *et al.,* 2012, has emphasised that HEIs are organisations where academics have the dominant power in how education and research are organised, and where academics' values and beliefs form a main reference for how universities respond to changes around them. When making decisions about issues such as curriculum, teaching materials, pedagogical approaches, and entry requirements for academic programs, academics have been found to rely on their disciplinary values and cultures. Common examples in the studies include (i) the strong reliance of natural scientists on quantitative methods and (laboratory -based) experiments in comparison to social scientists, who are traditionally more opened to use qualitative methods and case –based studies, and (ii) the differences between academics working in the fields of pure sciences and those specialized in applied fields. The first component of the theoretical framework is therefore suggested as 'the academic logics', pointing to how the characteristics of academic disciplines and academic conventions are likely to be an important component in how HEIs interpret and approach the notion of 'learning environment'.

Administrative logics

The emphasis in research on the academics' role does not imply that they are the only players in deciding how universities (should) behave. Academics' power and capacity to run "their" organization has been challenged by two other forces, the state and the market, especially since the emergence of the modern nation state and with the increase in global economic competition (Clark, 1983; Jongbloed, 2003). In particular, massification, internationalization and globalization of higher education have forced universities to pay increased attention to their capacities from an administrative perspective, to be able to coordinate a significant increase in students and educational programs, recruit new staff, ensure compliance with new regulations, and address the added administrative work load related to these processes (Olsen, 2005; Dill 2000; Del Favero, 2002; Birnbaum,1989; Reed 2002; Ramirez & Christensen, 2012). This development provides the rationale for the second component of the theoretical framework, the 'administrative logics'.

Strategic logics

Finally, much literature (including Findly & Tierney, 2010; Jennikens, 2002; Gornitzka & Langfeld, 2008; Teichler, 2009; Huisman & Van der Wende, 2005 and Frølich *et al.* 2013) has shown that (1) the recent rapid and continuous progress in technology, (2) the increase of populations and socio-economic needs, and (3) the increasing global competition for knowledge and economic resources, have all put pressures on universities' leaders, to look for new strategies when planning universities' activities and policies. As explained in research, to meet these pressures, university leaders have to develop strategies that can catch up with the above emerging changes and equip students with skills and knowledge that enable them to (i) compete for jobs in the global markets, and (ii) predict and solve the

new problems and needs emerging in their societies. This provides the background for the third part of the theoretical framework, the 'strategic logics'.

Conclusion

Applying these logics as analytical categories can help to investigate how HEIs approach the concept of learning environment, by examining how universities' interpretations of and strategies towards developing their learning environments are influenced by the different institutional logics at play, and by exploring the interplay between them with regard to decision making processes. Relevant questions here include the extent to which the development of learning environments is seen as primarily an academic or an administrative phenomenon, whether internal or external demands are driving change processes, and how global developments such as internationalisation and global competition are reshaping long established disciplinary approaches to teaching and learning. The presentation will conclude with some reflections on how these categories can be further developed into an analytical framework, and how it can be further applied empirically.

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