More than the sum of its parts: higher education research explored (0011)

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I am going to attempt to bring the papers in the symposium into relation with one another by considering a number of issues. The first of these is about internal and external relations and takes on board Karl Maton's (2005) criticism of higher education researchers as concentrating on either 'internalist' or 'externalist' accounts. Maton urges researchers to concentrate on the distinctive properties of higher education with its own practices which are not reducible to its constituent parts or to the operation of other social fields. I am asking what the papers taken together tell us about how external pressures have been refracted through the distinctive practices of higher education. The second theme is criticality. The issue of criticality exerts itself in a number of ways, not the least of which is through our own normativity. One main thrust of research, for example, is about 'improving' (not just understanding) student learning. My third, closely related, theme concerns the diverse nature of theorising/researching itself and notes the various literature authors are deploying and whether these are largely from within higher education and/or look outward towards broader social scientific debates and concerns. The final theme is about absences.

Internal and external relations

The papers in the symposium offer opportunities to reflect on the external forces shaping higher education but also on the distinctive dynamics of the field of higher education itself. In her presentation XXXX, for example, offer a critical account of globalisation and usefully problematize the idea of the global citizen and the possibilities of a pedagogy of discomfort. Another take on exploring internal and external relations is a paper which refers directly to the universities' own attempts at engagement with those outside universities, as this represents a slightly different take on these relations. XXXX, in this symposium, addresses the question of the relations between higher education and society directly and the ways in which changing policy environments influence universities' efforts to engage with those who have come to be known as the 'public'. The relationship between the internal knowledge practices of

universities and their relationship with attempts at communication beyond, however, touch on matters of central significance to debates in higher education.

Criticality

The central theme of this section is that criticality is deployed in a number of ways in research in higher education. XXXX for example, brings our gaze close to home analysing the gendered dynamic of the academy itself and pointing to systematic inequalities inside higher education. She shows how a number of 'dangerous discourses' legitimate and naturalise women's unequal positions. Another aspect of critique is meta-theoretical concerns with critical frameworks themselves as the paper by XXXX demonstrates. She analyses the different theoretical frameworks that can illuminate the development of academics as teachers.

Criticality also involves thinking more broadly about what might be the progressive and social justice potentials of higher education. XXXX approaches the analysis of social mobility from by analysing the rise of creditialism and the movement of increasing numbers of graduates into jobs which would not have been previously graduate jobs. This approach allow us to think more broadly about what might be the progressive and social justice potentials of higher education, since the contribution of higher education to social mobility cannot be taken for granted despite frequent political assertions to the contrary.

Literature

One of the other ways presentations can be distinguished is through the type of literature they cite. This is tied to criticality but not reducible to it. Some authors use sources primarily from other higher education researchers while others draw more broadly on frameworks from across the social sciences. There are two arguments that could be deduced from this observation. One is that it is a sign of maturity of the field of research into higher education that many writers can draw on theoretical and empirical research that concerns itself uniquely with the field of higher education itself. The second argument might be that papers which pay attention to broader framing within the social scientific literature offer more sophisticated accounts.

Absences

My noting of some absences is not one of critical intent in the negative sense but of critical engagement. My absences are not unique to this symposium and I have chosen them because they are important to taking the long view of research into higher education.

My first observation flows directly on from my analysis of citation practices of the presenters since these are largely in areas of social science. This might seem to state the obvious, but one strand of writing and researching about higher education has been by disciplinary practitioners researching their own practices as higher education teachers. The absence of these disciplinary voices might simply be that we are presenting at SRHE as professional higher education researchers rather than as disciplinary academics, but there have been arguments about the need to draw on broader disciplinary perspectives.

Students are very present but it is noticeable that student voices are largely absent. I do not mean students simply as re-represented in research but rather in the broader sense as actor activists and critics. It would be easy to dismiss this concern as simply an externalist dynamic but I want to suggest that significant changes to disciplines and curriculum have come about in part as a result of newer groups of students coming into higher education in large numbers. Student agency at the macro level of student protest and engagement are often ignored. Yet a minority of those students go on to be the academics of the next generation and develop new approaches and create new subject areas. Intellectual developments in feminist and post-colonial thinking, and the social movements that underpinned them, for example remain relatively under-analysed in higher education research and yet have significant implications for our understanding of curriculum.