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Rethinking higher education research: Towards a new epistemic order

Abstract

Currently, when there is a lot of political talk about the need for ‘impact’, and when public policy seeks to calibrate research quality, there is a pressing need to reconsider the relationships between higher education research and higher education policy. This conceptual paper focuses on the contemporary policy discourses in relation to higher education and also asks whether and in what ways the prevailing episteme of higher education can or should re-define and rethink its interpretive concepts and the relationships between them. It seeks to do this, beginning with considerations of the contested and changing character and practices of higher education policy and higher education research. It argues that the creation of the intellectual potentials of higher education studies is going to be a long and difficult process, of some complexity.

Proposal

There are important questions to be asked about the political position of higher education research and its performative praxis. Questions that raise important epistemological issues, such as what is good higher education knowledge, and who says so? How did our current assumptions, about higher education research, evolve? What is the contemporary political discourse within which higher education as an academic subject is being shaped? What at the present moment should be the agendas of academic attention in higher education studies?

Higher education is not a single or unified field of specialised academic study. However, discursively, much of higher education research has been shaped by the assumption that it should be based on ‘evidence’; should be ‘useful’ and ‘relevant’; and that its academic value is to influence policy and, more recently, have ‘impact’. This view – often driven by economics and positivist structural-functionalist sociology – located the field of study of higher education politically, and has been of continuing influence epistemologically; or perhaps more precisely, ideologically. In this paper, I will explore how we might think and theorise differently about higher education studies. *First*, I will analyse some of the powerful sources of the current ‘reading of higher education’, and show how they have framed the agenda of higher education studies. *Second*, the analysis will locate historically the concept of a ‘deductive rationality’; briefly illustrate its sociological power and legitimation motif; and ask whether and in what ways can or should we define a core intellectual agenda of higher education as an academic subject. *Finally*, I would like to reflect on where the future might lie in relation to this field, what issues might emerge, what kinds of long-standing concerns might be re-examined productively.

Higher education researchers have always dealt with a set of routine policy issues, treated as ‘normal-puzzle’ higher education (cf. Kuhn 1970). Higher education researchers may know about ‘quality’, ‘the student experience’, university governance, finance, access and equity, and so on, in increasingly marketised higher education systems. For example during the 1990s, in higher education publications and conferences, higher education policy continued

to be a central concern (cf. Tight 2014); albeit with authors showing an increasing alertness to a changing inter-national, trans-national, or even a supra-national world. In this paper, I will suggest that within the shifting agendas of normal-puzzle higher education, there are a few higher education motifs which help to define the core intellectual agenda of higher education as an academic subject. These include what we may call the ‘unit ideas’ (cf. Nisbet 1966) of higher education: autonomy; space; time; pedagogy; the state; as well as higher education system and concept of ‘knowledge’ to name a few. Within the frame of the analysis of this paper—the question of higher education research—perhaps the two most historically visible of these motifs are (i) system and (ii) knowledge. The motifs have not radically changed since Hall’s ‘science’ of ‘higher pedagogy’ in 1893 (Goodchild 1996). The two themes give three intellectual puzzles—creating what it might look to be a simple intellectual agenda:

- What are ways to understand the concept of knowledge?
- How can we understand the problematic of system? and
- In what ways should we try to understand the relations of knowledge and system?

In other words, any higher education research that attempts to respond to public and policy scepticism in terms of its practical value and ‘impact’ as well as influence the policy agenda has to deal with the themes of ‘system’ and ‘knowledge’. The significance of all of this ‘history’ is that it is not history. The three motifs – the relationship of higher education to local and international politics; the terms on which higher education may be defined as, or should aspire to be, a ‘science’; and the question of what we ‘see’ as ‘knowledge’ – in different higher educational systems. The three motifs are not merely still with us in higher education for they define higher education research.

The overall argument of this paper is that we can construct the higher education narratives for a rapidly changing world; however it is quite difficult to interpret such narratives. There is a lack of a coherent conceptual apparatus which permits us to extend the existing work on ‘system’. Higher educational systems can be read as compressed political messages and not just products of recent political action by ministers and civil servants. Thus, for purposes of developing a better understanding on the intellectual complexity of the problem one of our resources is the existing literature, rather than more research data.

Is there, then, a crisis? No; but what is suddenly newly significant are the great difficulties which Williams (2010) had in defining higher education studies. The difficulties were a reflection of a problem that had become structural and esoteric in our field of study. The field of study had grown in the post-war period. It acquired psychology, organisational studies and policy analysis; and its literature multiplied to include planning and economics of education, interesting philosophical, sociological and historical writing, and, later on, it drew new perspectives from anthropology and feminist thinking and post-colonialism and post-foundationalism. As a consequence, in 2017 the field of higher education studies and some of the theoretical ideas available to us are very attractive. However it is probably time for an intellectual tidy-up.

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