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Published

2010

Conference Title

Higher Education Close Up 5: Questioning Theory-Method Relations in Higher Education Research

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The ‘Wicked’ Problem of Quality in Higher Education: Macro, Meso and Micro Perspectives

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Extended Abstract

Overview

In his *HECU5* Think Piece, Trowler (2010) raises the provocative matter of ‘wicked issues’ surrounding the place of theory in higher education research. This paper addresses the wicked problem of quality in higher education, providing a close up perspective on implications for institutional research methods and their theoretical underpinnings.

The paper lends support to Trowler’s call to draw on explicit theory (see also Ball, 1995; Tight, 2004) to shape empirical research and the wicked problems it seeks to address. It explores some of the theoretical frameworks informing the quality debate in higher education and considers practical implications for grappling with the seemingly insoluble suite of problems associated with defining, measuring and demonstrating quality, particularly in the areas of learning and teaching. The paper examines issues associated with these wicked problems at the macro or national level, the meso or institutional level and the micro or disciplinary level.

Wicked Problems and Wickedity

Rittel and Webber (1973) introduced the notion of wicked problems in the context of urban planning where such issues as safety, aesthetics and ease of movement within a given space represent just a few of the more intractable and unique daily challenges facing urban planners. I would argue that managing universities involves similar sets of challenges. Universities operate in macro level policy settings that shape accountability and funding arrangements, yet at the same time they are responsible for supporting disciplinary and departmental groups, individual students and staff at the micro level. The myriad challenges associated with striving to achieve and demonstrate ‘high quality’ higher education while managing these competing demands in the context of a declining resource base and a high-stakes accountability environment are, indeed, wicked. The context usually demands rapid solutions and Trowler’s call to ‘make and remake’ decisions is a luxury rarely afforded university leaders.

These problems have all the characteristics of wickedness identified by Rittel and Webber (1973; see also Bore & Wright, 2009; Briggs, 2007; Camillus, 2008; Trowler, 2010): they are ill-defined; views on possible solutions vary widely across diverse parties with a vested interest in the problems and how to address them; the problems change in scope and nature on a daily basis and according to the setting in which they are addressed; and today’s apparent solution is no guarantee of tomorrow’s success.

The Wicked Problem of Quality in Higher Education

Posing particular challenges for the higher education sector is the expectation that universities will demonstrate evidence of quality in all aspects of their operations. This is an international challenge but nowhere is this wicked problem more evident than in the Australian higher education sector at present, where the federal government has introduced a significant new package of higher education reforms. These include: a new set of performance-based funding indicators to measure the quality of learning and teaching; the introduction of mission-based institutional compacts; and the new Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency to monitor quality and standards.

The government’s reform agenda has provoked debate across the sector. This is productive as long as it yields evidence-based theorising and robust approaches to quality assurance and enhancement in the system. However, it becomes problematic when it provokes reactive, ‘quick-fix’ approaches to ‘solving’ the problems of quality with limited or no reference to sound theorising and ‘abstracted empiricism’ (Trowler, 2010). The proposed Australian higher education Indicator Framework has invited the sector to revisit many of the perennial questions like: ‘*can quality in higher education be quantified and if yes, what are the best measures?*’; ‘*does a*

rigorous measure of teacher quality exist?'; 'is it fair to rely on student satisfaction ratings when they seem more like popularity contests than anything else?' and 'what about all those apparent unmeasurables like teacher personality or student motivation – where do they fit in?' Arguably, these are among the most wicked quality challenges in the sector.

Reflecting on two decades of 'the quality revolution', Newton (2010) observes a progression in relation to approaches to research in the field. Investigations have extended from examining the link between quality and policy implementation at the institutional meso level, towards a growing interest in how academics respond to quality assurance and quality frameworks at the micro disciplinary level. Depending on which perspective one adopts, the concept of quality may have different meanings. At the national and institutional levels, quality is typically *formally* defined and equated with such terms as 'excellence', 'consistency', 'value for money' or 'fitness for purpose'. In sharp contrast, Newton (2002; see also Harvey, 2002; Harvey & Green, 1993) found that at the micro departmental level, academic staff are more likely to attach *situated* meanings to the term 'quality'. These include quality as 'ritualism' and 'tokenism', quality as 'impression management' and quality as 'lack of mutual trust' (Newton, 2002, p.46). The fact that quality may be understood – and perhaps also operationalised – so differently, according to context and perspective, renders it a particularly wicked area to theorise and analyse.

Approaches to theorising the questions of quality in higher education are wide-ranging and contested. One reason for this is that these approaches represent the confluence of several theoretical paradigms and discourses. These paradigms include the often tacit performativity agenda (Blackmore, 2009; Cowen, 1996) and the Total Quality Management model (TQM; Bensimon, 1995) taken directly from industry and applied as a governance methodology for higher education. This has deeply influenced how universities approach the 'business' of education. Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) describe this as a 'flawed' strategy (p.1) that is both a myth and an illusion (Birnbaum & Deshotels, 1999). As an alternative, Srikanthan and Dalrymple (2002) contend for a holistic model for understanding and approaching quality in higher education – one that takes into account the unique aspects of service and pedagogical aspects, for example. Elements of this particular model are explored in the paper in response to Ball's (1995) argument in favour of explicit and responsive approaches to theory that serve to counter dominant discourses.

Several other theories underpinning how institutions go about managing their wicked issues are explored and critiqued in response to Trowler's challenge to ensure that close up research informing quality issues in universities is soundly theorised. Theoretical frameworks explored include Senge's learning organization theory (1990, 1999) which underpins much of the discourse on strategies for engaging members of the organization – particularly those at the micro level - in constructive problem-solving. Ortenblad (2001) distinguishes between the notion of learning organization and organisational learning – an important distinction in light of Trowler's challenge to be cautious about deferring to a small number of eminent theorists as we consider creative ways of addressing wicked problems. Systems theory (Ackoff, 1999) is also critiqued for its value in guiding decision-making about how best to approach the collection, analysis and dissemination of empirical institutional data to help universities and their communities to plan strategically and to respond to the quality imperatives from external bodies such as government and industry.

Summary

In summary, this paper takes a close up look at how university leaders and communities might sensitize themselves to a broader spectrum of theorised and evidence-based strategies for dealing with wicked issues posed by external factors such as the growth of the knowledge economy, a rapidly changing academic work environment, diverse student cohorts with changing demands and expectations, and government performativity agendas that determine funding allocations and institutional reputations. To help universities come to terms with these issues requires the capacity to locate micro and meso-level activities in the broader macro environment. It also warrants a strongly theorised approach to gathering and interpreting institutional data and ultimately to understanding the wickedly complex issue of quality.

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