

Researching Higher Educational Change and Transformation

Editors:

Penny Jane Burke

Institute of Education, University of London

Christine Musselin

Sciences Po, Paris

Barbara Kehm

University of Kassel, Germany

This special edition draws on the work of the EUREDACS Network, which was established in 2003 by Sylvain Kahn (Director for European Affairs) and Christine Musselin (director of the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations) at Sciences Po in Paris. The Network aims to support and challenge doctoral students and new doctoral candidates working on issues related to the europeanization of higher education and research. The network also aims to promote publication and dissemination of research results and to facilitate exchange and mobility among young and new scholars in this field.

Each year a group of doctoral students and new doctoral candidates, selected by the Scientific Committee¹, meets for the EUREDACS annual conference to present their work-in-progress to their peers. At this conference, the participants receive rigorous feedback and critique to help develop and refine their research. The aims of the conference are to:

- promote exchange, foster discussion and reflection among doctoral students and recent doctoral degree holders,
- encourage them to write and present papers at academic meetings and conferences,
- provide practical experiences as discussants and commentators,
- foster scientific, intellectual and critical exchange and debates.

EUREDACS pays specific attention to issues relating to the ‘europeanization of higher education’, which emerged from the Bologna Process. It is interested in addressing what the europeanization of national higher education means for change and transformation of higher education across European countries and for research policies and practices. It involves higher education researchers in analyzing and exploring a range of implications in relation to the europeanisation of higher education. This includes the analysis of the (potential) harmonisation, standardisation, convergence or normalisation processes that might affect the structure, academic curricula, accreditation procedures, the quality assessment and assurance systems, academic career patterns, the role of higher education institutions in local or regional development, the structure of university governance, the production of knowledge, the relationships between research and industry, the institutional structures for teaching and/or research. Furthermore, it examines the role of supra-national bodies in these processes, including the influence of American models and the impact of internationalisation. The contributions in this special edition consider these themes and issues with a particular focus on methodology.

In 2006, a EUREDACS conference was held in London hosted by the Institute of Education to examine methodological debates and perspectives in research on higher educational change and transformation. The work was of a very high quality and it was decided that it would be of great value to disseminate the work more widely through journal publication. The editorial team of *Reflecting Education* agreed to produce a special edition to draw attention to the importance of exploring methodology as a key dimension of the development of the relatively young field of higher education studies.

HIGHER EDUCATION AS A FIELD OF RESEARCH

Higher education is currently at the centre of much attention from a range of different social sites and ‘stakeholders’ including national, local, regional and international government bodies, policy-makers, business and industry, employers, new and diverse student constituencies, academics and HE managers and administrators. In the context of what has been constructed in contemporary discourses as the ‘knowledge society’, higher education has been seen by many as a central mechanism for social change and transformation. This is closely linked to concerns about national and global economies, globalization, changing labour markets, flexibility and modernization, and information and communication technologies. There is a strong sense of ‘greater importance’ attached to higher education and this is related to a myriad of social and economic factors. Higher education has itself undergone substantial changes, and faces significant challenges, leading to heated debates about the funding of higher education, the relationship between research and teaching, the perceived need for formal training of university teachers, new managerialism, and mechanisms for assuring quality and standards in higher education (Morley, 2003). Widening educational participation and access to higher education have become central themes in higher education policy as it has moved away from an ‘elite’ to a ‘mass’ system and as national governments have identified higher education as central to economic sustainability and social justice. Issues of diversity, equality and inclusion have challenged governments, policy-makers and academics, in relation to differences between higher education institutions, institutional management, quality and standards, curriculum, pedagogy and diverse student groups. The Bologna Process has underlined the need to unite different systems across Europe so that there is transferability across national and institutional diversities. Higher education has become ‘big business’ as well as being closely associated with other businesses throughout society as a whole (Tight, 2003, p. 4). All these different but interconnected concerns and changes have stimulated research on these issues and thus the growing field of higher education studies.

Yet higher education ‘is perceived as a relatively under-researched field, even though dozens of books and hundreds of articles are now published each year on this topic’ (Tight, 2003: 3). Tight also notes that ‘it could not be said that there is a developed and widely shared understanding of what the field of higher education research looks like’ (Tight, 2003: 2). This perspective is supported by Prichard and Trowler, who point out that

the need for more fine-grained, hermeneutically grounded studies in HE has not gone unrecognized. The importance and scarcity of such research approaches in the HE domain has been identified by many theorists (2003: xiii),

The increase in research that identifies itself as contributing to the field of higher education studies is relatively recent and there has been a sense of a need to ‘create some order in this field, by providing an overview of the current state of higher education and a guide to how it is (and may be) researched’ (Tight, 2003: 2). This special edition aims to contribute to such debates and discussions about ways of researching higher education and to draw attention to the intricacies of developing appropriate methodological frameworks for this project.

WHY IS METHODOLOGY IMPORTANT AS A FOCUS IN ITSELF?

Methodological issues often get sidelined or marginalized in discussions about research on higher education, which tend to focus on content and empirical issues rather than questions about the underpinning epistemological perspectives framing the research itself (Burke and Jackson, 2007). Often concerns with methodology get collapsed into discussions about methods alone. Yet methodology is more than methods and a strong research field requires rigorous and methodical attention to the underpinning knowledge frames influencing the research process. Indeed, methodological frameworks are central in the production of knowledge about higher education. The questions asked, the hypotheses formulated, the methods taken, the research relations fostered, the ethical issues considered, the power relations identified are all connected to the methodological frameworks in which the researcher and the researched are situated. Methodology includes concerns about methods; the tools used to collect and analyze data, but also consider ontological, epistemological and theoretical dimensions of the research process. Attention to the intricacies of these multi-dimensions of conducting research uncovers important questions about how and why the research was conducted, who was involved and why, the constraints and limitations of the research and the complex sets of relations between the different individuals taking part in the research process. Methodology is a contested site and there are different and competing epistemologies available to help researchers to formulate their research questions, problems or hypotheses. This shapes the key decisions made by researchers about the appropriate methods of data collection to use. Methodological frameworks influence the ways that complex power relations are negotiated in the research process, ways of engaging with and making sense of ethical issues and dilemmas and approaches to analyses and writing. Although in-depth considerations about methodology tend to get neglected in the field of higher education research, methodological frameworks profoundly shape what we understand about higher education and how we go about researching it at a critical moment of change and transformation.

As in other fields of research, the tension between inductive *versus* deductive approaches can be observed. The contributions presented at the conference and in this issue clearly reflect that both approaches are very likely to be followed. Some derive their questions and hypothesis from theoretical insights and therefore build their empirical work and select methodologies aiming at informing, confirming or informing those issues. Others design their empirical work and mobilise methodologies around less focused questions and expect their empirical results to allow them to develop “grounded theory”. What is at stake in research on higher education is of course not to choose one approach against another, but to

make the choice of one rather than an other more explicit and to be aware (thus to try and control) the advantages and limits of both approaches.

The process of formulating research questions or hypotheses is embedded in the different discourses at play about higher education as a field of research at a particular moment in time and space. Attention to context is thus central to the researcher in justifying why a particular research focus is pertinent and this is deeply interconnected with wider meanings around higher education that frame the research process. Of course, silences are as important as explicit articulations, and what is not asked or researched reflects the hegemonic discourses about what counts as important knowledge at a given moment in a specific context. Hegemonic discourses in research, such as generalisability, objectivity, validity, reliability, require careful thought and deconstruction to interrogate the operations of knowledge production and to expose taken-for-granted assumptions about what counts as 'good research'. In putting methodology at the centre of this special edition, the editorial team challenged the contributors to give careful thought to these issues.

The research projects discussed in this special edition draw mainly on qualitative methodologies and many are case studies. Such methodological frameworks insist on paying close attention not just to contextuality but also to positionality; the ways that the researcher locates her or himself in the research process. This has a number of important implications. For example, this involves the researcher in considering the relations in the field; ontological concerns become foregrounded in terms of who the researcher and the researched are and how their values and experiences might be implicated in the research. This requires the researcher to reflexively examine their location in the field of study, both in terms of the selection of key literature and secondary data being drawn on, as well as the way the researcher positions her or himself in relation to the research participants and 'the field' (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Ways of describing the 'researched' are key in understanding the underpinning methodological perspectives. For example, the researcher who identifies the researched as 'respondents' is likely to be taking a more positivist position epistemologically, and to be working towards the production of objective knowledge, distancing themselves through scientific methods. The researcher who describes the researched as 'participants' is more likely to be drawing on collaborative or participatory methodological frameworks, such as feminism, ethnography or constructivism. This highlights important questions about research relations in the field; not simply that interviews were used as a method of data collection but *how* interviews were used. Did the interviewer ask a list of pre-formulated questions in the same way to each respondent, using a structured interview schedule, in an attempt to elicit and uncover information? Or did the interviewer enter into a conversation with the participant, using a semi-structured interview schedule and understanding knowledge as co-constructed through the interactive interview process? These are key differences that highlight the importance of researchers explicitly interrogating their knowledge claims at all stages of the research process, from the proposal to the final written report.

It also points to the importance of examining power relations in the research process, as a central factor in the production of knowledge. For example, in situations that the researcher is conducting interviews with individuals in senior institutional positions, the researcher needs to pay attention to the ways this might impact on the kind of data collected. Is it

difficult in this situation for the researcher to access certain experiences or perspectives? How does the researcher negotiate this relationship? What are the ethical dilemmas? How does the researcher analyse the data and write about it? What are the gaps and silences? It is equally important for the researcher to consider the power dynamics of interviewing research participants who might be in a less powerful position institutionally, for example students in higher education. Ethics are central to such methodological considerations as the concern to address power relations in the research necessitates that methods of data collection, analysis and writing are addressed in relation to ethical issues.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

The five contributions of this special edition reflect the range of methodologies framing research on higher education and the diversity of interests and issues under exploration.

The contribution by Lucas Baschung focuses on the question of how the phenomenon of structured doctoral education in Europe can be studied. It contextualises this question as a multi-level issue which must take into account the European, national, and institutional level. Given the rather recent emergence of structured doctoral education in most continental European countries (following the implementation of reforms in the wake of the Bologna Declaration), the author argues for an exploratory approach based on case studies in two countries (Switzerland and Norway) which will provide a comparative angle. The four cases in each of the two countries are chosen to represent different disciplinary fields (biochemistry, engineering, finance, and aesthetics/cultural studies) and different types of higher education institutions in order to achieve as much breadth as possible. The chosen approach consists of a combination of interviews with relevant actors and analysis of existing regulations as well as the inclusion of emerging issues into national and European policy contexts. A final step in this well-argued, theoretically supported and methodologically sound research design is to relate the issue of structured doctoral education with institutional governance. Emphasis is put on the fact that structured doctoral education has become an issue in institutional management and is no longer exclusively an academic affair. In his conclusions the author evaluates the research design developed in the text by carrying out a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis and offering some general observations about the study of higher education.

Katharina Bjørkquist wants to study and understand the influence of stakeholders on Norwegian institutions. One of the stimulating insights of her work is not to adopt the taken-for-granted discourse on the “new” influence of stakeholders but to look at it over time and thus to question what is new and how far it is so. In order to tackle this issue she starts from a theoretical reflection elaborated from two main perspectives available in the literature: one on governance models and policy instruments, and the other on stakeholder theory. This enables her to identify different stakeholders regimes, a concept, as she states, which “makes it possible to incorporate the notion of stakeholder – and thereby actors – in all the governance or steering models”. Katharina Bjørkquist then designs an empirical approach which is suited to the research issues inspired by her initial reflection and she selects two higher education institutions accordingly.

Roland Bloch discusses his methodological framework by focusing on his use of discourse analysis to examine students' practices, actions and experiences in the wider context of Bologna reform. His contribution provides an example of research that is committed to linking the macro dimension of the Bologna reforms to the micro level of students' practice. He presents a detailed consideration of some of the debates around constructivist research and contestations about the extent to which discourse and structure determine the actions and practices of certain subjects, in this case the students taking part in his study. Bloch's discussion of interaction as an interview approach sheds light on some key issues about power in the field and how researchers might negotiate this. He also considers the status of interview data, highlighting that interviews contribute to the constructive task of research. Bloch acknowledges that his research must be understood in relation to the specific student populations selected in his study and calls for further research to examine the impact of the Bologna reforms in other contexts, and most particularly on those directly affected, including students but also teachers and administrators.

Yu Ching Kuo's research is also concerned with student experience and looks in particular at the identity constructions of international students in British universities. Her methodological discussion pays close attention to an often ignored but nonetheless significant dimension of research; the writing process. Yu Ching Kuo highlights an important issue that too often is overlooked in higher education studies; that the ways researchers write about research is underpinned by the ontological and epistemological perspectives that she is drawing on. However, in the case of doctoral studies this is complicated by the complex negotiations that take place between doctoral students and their supervisors. Kuo's account provides an important insight into the struggles around writing in academic contexts and highlight issues of authorship and power in the process of writing a doctoral thesis. She also makes explicit the ways that writing is inextricably shaped by methodology.

In the final paper of this special edition, A. I. Melo, C.S. Sarrico and Z. Radnor describe and explain the research design they have chosen for a study they are about to develop in the United Kingdom and Portugal. They first justify their interest for the relationship between governance structures and performance management systems in universities by the lack of literature and studies trying to connect these two dimensions. They then explicitly present their methodological choices mainly based on comparative case-studies dealing with all levels of responsibilities within different institutions.

REFERENCES

- Burke, P.J. & Jackson, S. (2007) *Reconceptualising Lifelong Learning: Feminist Interventions*. London: Routledge.
- Mauthner, N.S. & Doucet, A. (2003) "Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis". In *Sociology*, 37(3), pp. 413 - 432.
- Morley, L. (2003) *Quality and Power in Higher Education*. Berkshire, England and Philadelphia: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.

Prichard, C. & Trowler, P. (Eds.) (2003) *Realizing Qualitative Research into Higher Education*. Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate.

Tight, M. (2003) *Researching Higher Education*. England: Society for Research in Higher Education and Open University Press.

Correspondence

Dr Penny Jane Burke, p.burke@ioe.ac.uk

Christine Musselin, c.musselin@cso.cnrs.fr

Professor Dr Barbara Kehm, kehm@incher.uni-kassel.de

¹ In order to develop and run this network, Sciences Po has founded a scientific committee composed of six well-known European research centres and their representatives: CIPES, Center for Research in Higher Education Policies, Portugal (Alberto Amaral); CSO, Sciences Po and CNRS, France (Christine Musselin); CHEPS, University of Twente, Netherland (Jürgen Enders); Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom (Penny Jane Burke); International Centre for Higher Education Research (INCHER-Kassel), University of Kassel, Germany (Barbara Kehm); OSPS, University of Lausanne, Switzerland (Gaële Goastellec); Stein Rokkan Centre for Social Studies, University of Bergen, Norway (Ivar Bleiklie)