

Policies and Practices in Higher and Professional Education

Editorial

Dr Vincent Carpentier

Institute of Education, University of London

This Special Issue of Reflecting Education presents a selection of papers based on the dissertation work from students on the MA in Higher and Professional Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. It represents a great opportunity for students to disseminate the results of their research to a wider audience.

The programme welcomes students from a wide-range of backgrounds and work contexts (academics, managers, administrators and academic-related staff; professionals in areas such as medicine, law and the arts; professional development and accreditation consultants; widening participation and access officers; and policy-makers) who seek to develop critical insights into higher education policies and practices in the UK and overseas. The programme offers them an opportunity to explore, share and challenge existing knowledge and personal and professional experience by engaging with different ideas, concepts and values.

Making connections between theory, policy and practice is particularly important in a contested area such as higher education. A closer look at history shows that debates regarding higher education policies and practices have been the norm rather than the exception. Today's context certainly does not contradict such assertion. The programme proposes to reflect and explore critically some of the past, contemporary and future changes in the world of higher and professional education. Key areas of the field are considered such as the purpose and nature of higher education; funding mechanisms; access and widening participation policy; questions of management and quality evaluation; research and teaching and learning activities; the relationships and tensions between professionalization, autonomy and accountability. Students are invited to reflect on each of these issues but also to connect them (they tend to be compartmentalised) by engaging with several sets of questions and debates. I will focus on three of them here: the aims of higher education, the conception of policy at national and global levels and their implementation by institutions.

Most debates on the alternative ways of developing higher education policies and practices do (or should) lead to reflect on the nature and the aim(s) of higher education. This area of the field questions the complementarity, or increasingly the competition, between the social, geopolitical, political, cultural or economic forces which influence the expansion (or contraction) of higher education. How can we keep a balance between learning for its own sake and professionalization? Is higher education a public, private or mixed good? The programme seeks to stimulate a reflection on those issues which we think can best be informed by interdisciplinarity, by mobilising insights from philosophy, history, economics and sociology and other disciplines.

The alternative ways in which a society defines what is or should be higher education have a great impact on another set of issues which relate to the principles and design of higher education policy. How do governments manage (or struggle) to articulate policies regarding funding, equity and quality? How are funding settlements constructed? Who pays and who benefits from higher education? What are the implications of the rise of private funding such as fees and the emergence of private provision? What are the financial and non financial barriers to access, participation and outcomes? How can these barriers be removed? How should a fair and efficient higher education system be organised? How to address these questions in an increasingly global context?

These key questions should encourage us to explore the connections and tensions between national and institutional policies and practices in higher education. What does policy change mean for institutions (or groups of institutions)? Should we seek competition or cooperation between institutions? In which ways do these macro changes affect academic and non academic staff and their working relationship? Are there potential tensions between accountability, professional autonomy, transparency and trust? What is the likely impact of the contemporary changes on students and their relationship with staff and institutions? What are the effects of the changes in funding and organisation on teaching and learning activities (face to face or distance mode) from recruitment to assessment? How should institution engage with global higher education?

These sets of institutional, national and global issues are wide-ranging and difficult to address jointly (Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010). Individuals and social groups will have different responses to what higher education is or should be, to the appropriate levels of access and participation, to the adequate contribution to its funding and the ways it should be used. Thus, the programme offers multiple lenses to explore these questions. It is an opportunity to connect, compare and contrast the ways in which various theories (within or across disciplines) and different research methods (both quantitative and qualitative) engage with these issues. This reflection is enriched by the personal and professional experience of students. This pluralistic exchange of views is further enhanced by the experience of overseas students and British students who studied, lived or worked abroad who offer a priceless opportunity to compare and contrast national contexts in a global world.

The engagement with research, concepts and theories is a challenging but rewarding process. Many of our students indicated that their engagement and the critical discussion of the various research frameworks with tutors and their peers have in many cases transformed the way they see their work and role in their institution and at times resulted in changes in their practices. These developments can be attributed to the engagement of our students with research not just as readers but also as producers. Most dissertations which were undertaken within the programme and on which these papers are based are examples of how research can be used in order to reflect on one's personal and professional experience and to contribute to a wider understanding of higher education policies and practices. These papers are all located within interdisciplinary settings and combine various research methods. They represent valuable contributions to the field of higher and professional education (Tight, 2003).

The first two papers explore some key aspects of widening participation policies and practices in the British higher education (David, 2009). Lynn Featherstone examines the role of the admission policy in an elite university. She explores the introduction of contextualisation (the consideration of background characteristics of applicants) in the recruitment interview process as a driver of widening participation. Her analysis of data collected from a questionnaire and follow-up interviews of key staff involved in the recruitment process allows her to identify and discuss key prospects and challenges associated to the implementation of the widening participation agenda at the institutional level. Her findings show that contextualisation has changed practices and embedded a holistic approach to recruitment but also indicate that some barriers related to judgment, perception and interpretation are still present and slowdown the implementation of widening participation policies.

Hannah Pudner's paper explores a similar topic from another angle by looking at how local student unions perceive and engage with the widening participation agenda. Her comparative assessment is based on the analysis of a questionnaire sent to more than 40 local students unions and follow-up interviews. She identifies substantial differences in the type and intensity of student unions' engagement with widening participation activities depending on the position of their institutions in the stratification of the English higher education system. These studies, which offer a better understanding of policy conception and implementation, are important in today's tough challenges faced by the widening participation agenda.

The next two papers explore two key aspects of higher education at the global level: marketization and privatisation. Stephanie Finney examines the impact of media rankings on US higher education. The first part of her research develops a textual analysis of the marketing materials of more than 50 ranked full-time MBA programs. It shows that "lower ranked programs are more influenced by rankings than their more highly ranked counterparts" and tend to resort to "creative interpretation" to present their result in more favourable way. The second part of the research is a comparative analysis of the main ranking websites. It reveals notable differences in the ways they measure the different fragments of the educational experience. However, a common feature is a clear tendency to favour employment indicators rather than those of teaching, learning, and diversity. The paper offers a valuable contribution to the analysis of rankings and reputation (Marginson, 2009). It poses important questions about the adequacy of rankings and proposes a valuable critical reflection on their "ability to influence and homogenize general conceptions of what constitutes a quality educational experience".

Lucia Quintero explores the massification of Mexican higher education which has been driven by public, private elite and private demand-absorbing institutions respectively catering for the upper, upper middle and lower middle class. The interview of official and senior staff from each type of universities of a Mexican northern state offers valuable insights into the dilemmas posed by capacity building policy with a specific focus on the tensions between the expansion of access and quality. The fact that demand absorbing private universities which welcome non-traditional students tends to be overlooked by public authorities raises concerns about quality and equity. According to the author, the government should develop a more coordinated and integrated public policy which will apprehend in a holistic manner the development of higher education in Mexico. The paper offers a good contribution to the

understanding of private higher education and equity (Altbach, 1998, McCowan, 2007) and important insights into countries in which private provision is emerging such as the UK (King, 2008).

The final paper explores the assessment of professional practice through reflective writing. Jacqui Ward examines the use of log books, a written record used as a way to develop the reflective practice of trainee planners and to assess professional competence as the means to award professional qualification. The analysis of the trainee planners' log books reveals some clear evidence of a move towards reflection leading to improved professional practice. It also reveals some challenges in relation to the fact that writing for an external audience may in a certain sense limit reflectivity. Re-examining this tension is proposed as a means of taking the value of the log book beyond being merely an assessment tool towards becoming a true learning and developmental driver.

The articles in this Special Issue are offered in the hope that they enable critical engagement with key areas of policies and practices of higher and professional education with clear implications for today's world.

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Correspondence

Dr Vincent Carpentier, v.carpentier@ioe.ac.uk