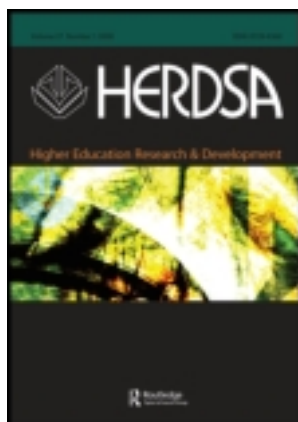


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On: 11 October 2012, At: 05:45

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Higher Education Research & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cher20>

The growth of higher education studies: from forerunners to pathtakers

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To cite this article: Bruce Macfarlane & Barbara Grant (2012): The growth of higher education studies: from forerunners to pathtakers, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 31:5, 621-624

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.719283>

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EDITORIAL

The growth of higher education studies: from forerunners to pathtakers

Reflecting the distinction made originally by R.S. Peters (1964) in relation to education as a discipline, the study of higher education may be understood as a multiple series of intersecting cognate fields rather than one that is discrete. The theoretical constructs on which higher education research relies tend to derive largely from scholars of sociology, psychology or philosophy. For example, few studies of access to higher education among under-represented groups in society would be complete without reference to Pierre Bourdieu's social and cultural capital or Albert Bandura's concept of self-efficacy. Similarly, those who write about the aims of higher education rarely do so without reference to John Henry Newman. Applying the terms adopted by Patricia Gumpert (2002) in her study of knowledge creation in feminist scholarship, such theorists are in many ways the 'forerunners' of higher education research.

The generation who follow may be termed the 'pathfinders'. They directly seek to create knowledge about the new field and seek its legitimization. Pathfinders help to establish a research field as a worthy subject of academic scrutiny. Burton Clark, Tony Becher and Maurice Kogan are members of this generation in a higher education research context. To give further examples: the work of Martin Trow identified access and massification as important areas for investigation, while that of Diana Laurillard helped establish research about e-learning, Sandra Acker did the same for gender, and the labours of Ference Marton and Roger Säljö, Mike Prosser and John Biggs, among others, made significant contributions in legitimizing the study of student learning at university more broadly.

There is now a new generation of higher education scholars though, 'the path-takers', some of whom are showcased in this special issue. They are able to select intellectual interests from the territory of higher education studies legitimized by the pathfinders and extend them into new areas. This new generation is more professionalized due to the growth of masters' and doctoral degrees in higher education. It includes a growing number of researchers based in academic or educational development centres, of higher education specialists more often located across social science faculties and of women. Those contributing to this special issue reflect the diverse locations in which the modern generation of higher education researchers may be found: Chi Baik, Chrissie Boughey, Angela Carbone, Neil Haigh, Tony Harland, Penny Niven, Susan Slade and Calvin Smith are situated in (primarily) academic development centres; Shuang-Ye Chen, Miriam David and Glen Jones in faculties of education; while Sue Clegg, Li-Fang Hu and Malcolm Tight are in higher education research centres; Chrissie Boughey and Marnie Hughes-Warrington occupy university leadership and management roles; Margaret Bearman and David Neumann represent those higher education researchers located in other disciplines and departments of the university (respectively, health and psychology). Several contributors, including the editors, have worked across more than one of these locations during their academic career, re-locating to find new opportunities to flourish as higher education researchers.

The diverse locations of our contributors are symptomatic of the fact that education faculties more focused on schooling and dependent on the income derived from teacher education have long neglected research into higher education. Higher education studies only really started to emerge as an organized interdisciplinary field of study during the late-1960s and early-1970s. In its relatively short history, the field has been characterized by a bifurcation: scholars have generally coalesced around policy-based studies *or* learning and teaching research. The lack of communication between these research communities may partly explain the challenge in establishing higher education as a coherent field. Indeed, this journal has been principally associated with learning and teaching research rather than the policy domain traditionally occupied more explicitly by others such as *Higher Education Quarterly*.

Since the 1970s, the growth of higher education as a field is evidenced by the emergence of dedicated research centres and professorial appointments across the world, as well as the burgeoning number of specialist higher education journals. But do these phenomena necessarily make higher education a 'field'? If it is a field, how has it been constructed? What are its core concerns and methodologies and why? This special issue contains wide-ranging contributions by international scholars from Australia, Canada, China, Hong Kong, New Zealand, South Africa and the UK, who examine these and other questions. In the questions they engage with, the contributors draw on a range of substantive and theoretical perspectives.

This special issue on the development of higher education as a research field opens with a contribution from Malcolm Tight that, as in previous work (Tight, 2003), is largely substantive in nature. In his article, Tight makes a comparative analysis of publication patterns across 15 specialist higher education journals between two years: 2010 and 2000. On the basis of his analysis, he concludes there has been a marked increase in the volume of publications, with journals in the field now adopting an increasingly international perspective and women playing a more significant role as higher education researchers.

Two further contributors to the issue help to explain some of the trends that Tight identifies. Sue Clegg provides a multi-stranded sociological critique of the idea of higher education research as a 'field' (drawing on work by Wenger, Becher and Trowler, Bernstein, Bourdieu and Archer), proposing instead that we consider it as a series of related fields or literatures. In her essay, she distinguishes between research into higher education, academic development and disciplinary teaching and argues for the importance of coming to grips with the normative dimensions of doing higher education research. She reminds us that not only are questions of structure and power central, but also we need to interrogate our own interests as researchers in the field. Coming at the matter from another angle, Miriam David examines higher education research through the lens of feminist knowledge and scholarship and identifies the key influence of the so-called 'second wave' of feminists who have entered academic life across humanities and social sciences, including higher education studies. Her commentary showcases an abundance of feminist work with diverse standpoints, both theoretically and geographically, as well as criticising the ways in which this work has *not* been taken up by dominant research or policy agendas. Her work also reminds us of the significance of feminist work for leading the way in providing critiques of higher education in the latter part of the previous century.

The growth of higher education as a research field may also be examined from the perspective of national systems. Three of the papers in this special issue make contributions of this kind. Shuang-ye Chen and Li-Fang Hu chart the rapid growth of higher

education research over the past 30 years and show how, in China, the field has somewhat distinctively been 'co-constructed' by the state and the academic community. Their paper shows how the challenges facing higher education research in this context also reflect wider national concerns connected with internationalization. Chris-sie Boughey and Penny Niven's paper is more specifically focused on the way research in academic or educational development has emerged in South Africa. Taking a critical realist standpoint, their paper foregrounds the politics of research by focusing on the structural and cultural conditions underpinning the growth of this influential sub-domain of higher education research during a period of significant social and economic upheaval. In the third of these country-specific papers, Glen Jones explores the emergence of Canadian higher education research as a field since the mid-1960s and notes both its fragmentation (a view familiar for other jurisdictions) and a lack of significant growth since the 1970s. He also points out some of the limits of Canada's distinctive 'local' – provincial rather than national – policy-making framework.

Turning to the matter of diversity among higher education researchers noted above, Tony Harland's article offers an analysis of this variety with some consideration of how it relates to the academic tribes and territories made famous by Becher (1989). Harland argues for higher education as 'an open-access discipline' with fluid cognitive borders: in his view, such permeability is a strength because it makes the study of higher education democratic, that is 'inclusive and open to all-comers'. The flip side of this view, however, is that higher education research might be perceived as something 'virtually anyone can do': such a conundrum is at the heart of the development of any new field with concomitant – and political – considerations of accessibility versus status. One way to think about a large group of the researchers that Harland identifies (the 'part-timers') may be as 'amateurs': those who are motivated to undertake higher education research by their *love* for the subject rather than by their training or profession. We may well remember that in many fields dedicated amateurs have led the way in discovering new knowledge – and that the zeal such practitioners bring to their work can be invigorating to those for whom it is business as usual. Such a view supports Harland's commitment to an open-access model for the field even as it flies in the face of a culture obsessed with status and credentials.

While understanding the development of higher education research cannot be done without reference to national systems, nor is it complete without reference to the micro level. Being a higher education researcher is a personal journey – as Neil Haigh illustrates in his paper focused on historical work. Using a self-study methodology, he provides reflections and insights related to his own learning journey as a higher education researcher dating back to the mid-1960s in Aotearoa New Zealand. His story shows how the literature he was exposed to in his graduate work has been enduringly formative. He also raises considerations that need to be taken seriously in the induction of new researchers to the field: how do we get them to engage with the work that has already been done in the field? If they don't, they risk reinventing the wheel, a phenomenon that is sometimes remarked of work produced within the scholarship of teaching and learning – a sub-field of higher education research in which Haigh is working with colleagues from across his institution.

It is clear that higher education researchers face many challenges in building the reputation of the field for quality and in convincing policy-makers that their research has important implications for practice. In our final article, Margaret Bearman and her colleagues point out that there has been relatively little use of systematic review methodology among higher education researchers. This contrasts with the use of systematic

reviews among healthcare and, to a lesser extent, health-professional education researchers. Their paper highlights the importance of moving beyond perceptions, raised by Tony Harland and others, that higher education research lacks the rigour and specialist body of knowledge associated with other fields and sub-fields. If we are to have a collective impact on shaping higher education policy and practice – as well as deepening our understanding of the history and present of the territory – these are two of the challenges researchers in the field must address.

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