

## POINTS FOR DEBATE

### The higher education research archipelago

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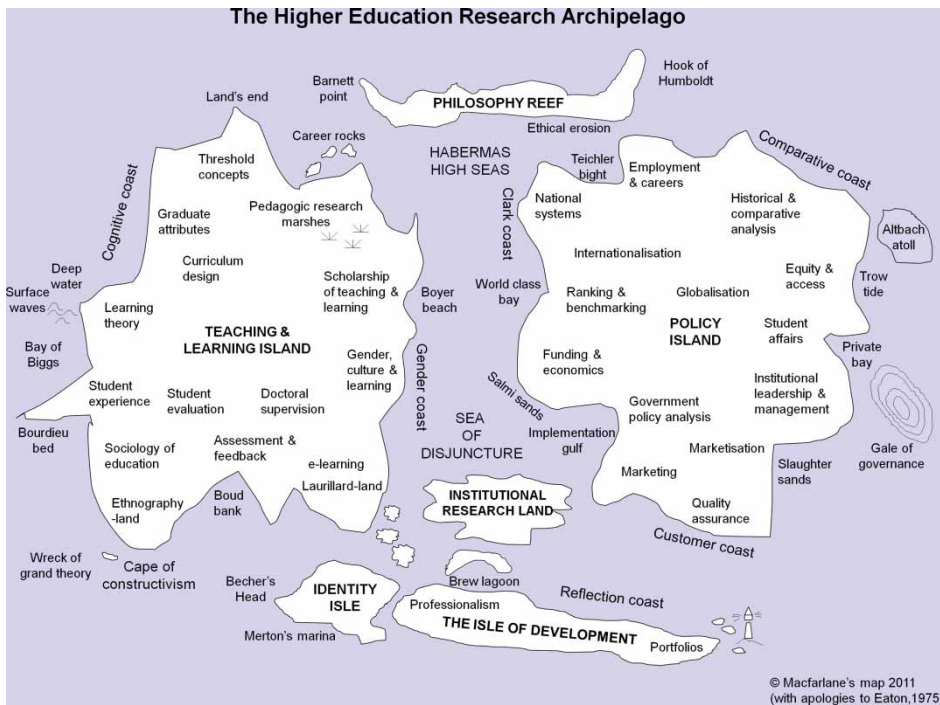


Figure 1. The higher education research archipelago.

Ever since I stumbled into doing higher education research as a young academic in the 1980s, I have been trying to understand it as a 'field' of study. My career, as a former business lecturer, then an academic developer and now an associate professor for higher education working in an Education Faculty has given me opportunities to see it from different angles. Hence, in many respects, the map I present here says as much about my own background and experiences as a higher education researcher as about the field more generally.

The main point I am seeking to make through the map is the way in which higher education research is crudely split between policy-based and teaching- and learning-

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oriented researchers who rarely, in my experience, have much awareness of each others' scholarship. This divide, revealed in Tight's (2003) analysis, came into sharp focus for me after moving from an academic development role in the UK to a policy department within an education faculty in Hong Kong. Few policy researchers seem to have heard of Michael Prosser but, equally, it is unlikely that many teaching and learning researchers have much familiarity with the work of Burton Clark. This mutual ignorance is hardly surprising as the growth of journals reflecting this division over the last 20 years has reinforced the schism. While teaching and learning research needs to resist becoming a tool of policy initiatives, the challenge for policy researchers is in closing the implementation gulf in the middle of the map. The 'sea of disjuncture', as I have called it, could do with some serious navigation.

The teaching and learning island on the left-hand side of the map is probably a lot bigger than it would have been 20 years ago before the growth of academic/educational/faculty development units and their associated research activities focused on student learning. This has shifted the balance of scholarship in a way that can be illustrated by comparing back-issues of a leading but 'non-aligned' journal such as *Studies in Higher Education*. If you look at volume 14, issue 3, published in 1989, there were eight papers on, variously, the intellectual and ethical development of students, American Community Colleges, experiential research, university management, the purpose of higher education, historians as an academic tribe, providing higher education to socially disadvantaged populations and continuing education. This is quite an eclectic mix. The contrast with volume 34, issue 2, published in 2009 could not be more startling. Almost all the papers in this more recent issue are about students and student learning: the academic attainment of students with disabilities, students learning environments, student beliefs and attitudes about authorial identity, the student as a co-producer of knowledge, student models of learning, the experience of doctoral students and (the odd one out) UK professional bodies.

It is also instructive to look at who publishes in higher education journals now. The 'amateur' culture, represented by the policy analysis and reflections of senior managers and contributions from academics in adjoining (or foundational) disciplines such as sociology, philosophy, politics, history and psychology, has declined. It has been displaced by a new generation who possess specialist qualifications in higher education research and role descriptions to match. The burgeoning literature on the experiences of doctoral students is illustrative of this significant shift in interests.

I must also admit that the map demonstrates my own largely Western-centric view of higher education research. The 'names' that appear on the map are mainly US, UK and Australasian, in addition to three Germans (Habermas, Von Humboldt, Teichler), a Frenchman (Bourdieu) and a Moroccan (Salmi). These include the living and the dead, as true academic legacy always extends beyond the grave. The map further shows how higher education researchers are drawn from foundational disciplines such as sociology (e.g. Bourdieu, Clark, Land, Trow), psychology (e.g. Biggs, Boud) and philosophy (e.g. Barnett, Habermas). No thesis or article about student transition into university would be complete without a reference to Pierre Bourdieu. Yet, of course, the great man would not have considered himself a 'higher education researcher'.

To my chagrin, there are just three women featured, Sheila Slaughter, Angela Brew and Diana Laurillard, although this is perhaps, in my defence, partly about the way the field has been historically dominated by mainly male, policy-focused researchers. I believe that the balance is now shifting rapidly toward the more highly feminised academic development research community. I would like to think the map might look quite

different if I re-drew it in 10 years' time. But I must be honest. The criteria for inclusion of well-known figures from higher education research was influenced almost as much by whether I could alliterate them with a suitable coastal feature as their quantum of fame. Lack of space and an inability to rhyme meant the exclusion of any number of the 'great and good'.

The map alludes to other tensions within our territorial waters. This includes the way that those from a range of disciplines committed to pursuing pedagogic research must often do so at the expense of their own academic career defying conventional expectations for subject-based scholarship. You will note that I have located some 'career rocks' off the coast of the pedagogic research marshes: this is a nod to Stierer's (2007) stark warning that pedagogic research can be 'a form of career suicide' (p. 2).

Finally, please do not take this map too seriously. I am sure you realise that it is intended to be, at least in part, tongue-in-cheek. Yet, I would like to think it might gently provoke as well as amuse. As we are all social constructivists now (note the 'wreck of grand theory' off the southern tip of teaching and learning island), I am sure you will see the world of higher education research differently than me. But I hope the version I have put before you does not make you feel too seasick.

### Acknowledgements

The genesis of the map was a presentation I gave at the Society for Research into Higher Education Annual Postgraduate Researchers conference in 2010 and this more detailed version resulted from my preparations for a talk I delivered at the HERDSA 'Researching higher education' symposium at Auckland in 2011. I am grateful to a number of colleagues, including Anatoly Oleksiyenko, Jisun Jung and Ray Land for their forbearance when I thrust earlier versions of the map before them. Their sometimes bemused but always insightful reactions helped to improve it considerably. The map was 'inspired' by James Eaton's 'curriculum archipelago', which appeared in the first book about education that I ever bought (Eaton, 1975). Thank you, James.

### References

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