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Higher Education Research and Reality: They Need to Be Better Aligned

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Abstract
This article argues that there are currently gaps existing between higher education research and reality. Such a segregation indicates a kind of misalignment and disjuncture between the two realms, and calls for reimagining and transforming the field of higher education research.

There are currently gaps between higher education research and reality, and in this article, we will try to understand how the field of higher education research could be transformed drawing upon two fundamental observations.

The Field Is Short of Visionary Imagination

This sentiment is primarily based on two observations. One is that the field witnesses little visionary research with imagination, i.e., the type of research that would orient or reorient the direction of higher education as an essential realm and institutional entities operationalizing this realm. Put explicitly, there are now significant higher education practices that are in the lead of any research agenda. For example, we now see a few exciting experiments with transforming the traditional patterns of organizing and delivering university education, spearheaded by such institutions or initiatives as Minerva University, Singularity University, London Interdisciplinary School, Olin College of Engineering, and Stanford 2025 (a project exploring the future of Stanford University initiated by a group within the university but outside the formal field of educational research). They all aim to prepare the students with the essential competencies for the future life and society, and enable the students to leverage knowledge to reinforce resilience, overcome uncertainty, and solve complex problems with multiple disciplinary approaches.

Arguably, such institutions and initiatives (though still small in number or size) concern the future patterns of higher education, and preparation of students for working in enterprises not yet created and on problems not yet identified. In the end, the university is about imaginative acquisition of knowledge and ultimately turning the power of imagination into a form of human resource (as Whitehead envisioned).

Notably, those institutions/initiatives emerge against a backdrop in which universities are experiencing skepticism, even in the most advanced systems like that of the United States. A recent survey administered by the *Wall Street Journal* and the University of Chicago found that 56 percent of Americans lost faith in university education, up from 40 percent in 2013. Such skepticism is strongest among people aged 18-34 (the most relevant age group to university education), and among people with university degrees.

Not surprisingly, the PBS news recently reported that the number of higher education students in the United States dropped from 20 million to about 15 million between 2015 and 2023. Certainly, such skepticism is observed in other countries, too, and this new "normal" portends a demand for profound changes in higher education in the years to come. While those aforementioned institutions and initiatives are leading the way for such changes, they do not commonly appear on the radar of specialist higher education researchers, let alone being guided by the research outputs.

Research of imaginative nature requires the guidance of innovative and progressive theories, yet the field of higher education research has never enjoyed a reputation for inducing original theories. So far, most theories applied in this field are borrowed from areas including organizational studies, management studies, sociology, political science, philosophy, history, literature, psychology, and even the sciences. The commonly adopted theoretical frameworks, such as (neo)institutionalism, structuralism, functionalism, path-dependency theory, post-/neocolonialism, postmodernism, pluralism, critical theories (to name a few) all come from those areas. When we study a phenomenon existing in the real world for a while, it is common to relate it to something else in another area, and thus borrow well-established theories from that area. Nevertheless, when we try to imagine something beyond the reality in a field, it would be stimulating and authentic to start from the primordial grand theories in the field, which literally approximates the first principles thinking, i.e., what Aristotle defined as "the first basis from which a thing is known."

The Field Is Deficient in Terms of Capturing Real Practices

The second observation is that higher education research appears to experience an increasing inability to capture the real practices as well, which is arguably caused by a discrepancy between the holistic tendency/nature of higher education practices and the long-existing fragmentation in this field. Bruce Macfarlane uses the metaphor of a "higher education research archipelago" to shed light on the crude split between policy-based and teaching/learning-oriented researchers in this field (whereby researchers and studies are clustered and isolated on the "islands" of "teaching and learning," "policy studies," "institutional research," "students experience," "finance and administration," "professional development," etc.). He also applies the analogy of a "sea of disjuncture" to illuminate how a new generation of specialist higher education researchers have alienated this field from such foundational disciplines as sociology, psychology, philosophy, history, etc. We should not forget that from those foundational disciplines many great minds came to this field, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Burton Clark, Ray Land, Martin Trow (sociology), Alexander Astin, John Biggs, David Boud, Stanley Hall, Wilbert McKeachie, Robert Pace (psychology), Robert Berdahl, Roger Geiger, Guy Neave, Sheldon Rothblatt (history), Clark Kerr, Lionel Robbins (economics), Jürgen Habermas (philosophy), Tony Becher (anthropology), Derek Bok (law), Ernest Boyer (science/audiology), to cite only a few.

More importantly, we must understand that higher education practices are moving towards a more integrated and holistic reality, where the quality and outcomes of higher education are more and more ensured via holistic approaches. In contrast, in the research realm, institutional researchers typically do not connect their data analysis to improving the student experience, policy researchers are commonly unaware of human cognitive development, and teaching and learning specialists often have little influence on academic professional development.

Given this situation, the fragmentation in higher education research has evolved into a gap between the research and the reality, which naturally leads to trouble when trying to capture complex issues like the growing skepticism and distrust in higher education, as revealed by the aforementioned poll, let alone helping resolve them. In this regard, a widespread story has been circulated about a former president of a major university in China publicly stating that he would not consult higher education specialists when running into issues and would turn to scholars in some foundational disciplines instead. Now, with the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), higher education researchers will soon find a professional crisis coming to their doorway, as AI could do a far better job with

fragmented research, in which literature, information and data are normally confined in clear-cut and limited territories.

Concluding Remarks

In sum, the weakness in theoretical originality and innovation has resulted in a bottleneck for the field of higher education research when it comes to reimagining the future of higher education. The status quo of fragmented and isolated research in this field has resulted in inadequately capturing the reality of higher education practices that increasingly require holistic effort and approaches. This causes the field to fall behind and be unable to reorient its practices. Down the road, this field should, first and foremost, recognize its originality defects, and then imagine the way out through innovation. For example, since this field has a low threshold in terms of professional training and preparation, it should not seek the identity of a specialist discipline but rather open up its borders, and endeavor to establish interdisciplinarity as its identity and perhaps even its motto. Scholars and practitioners of various academic and social backgrounds should be invited and encouraged to synthesize their perspectives, opinions and experiences. All this can help ensure this research field is realigned with the higher education world, now featuring an increasingly holistic approach to knowledge organization and dissemination. ◢

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