

Policy Implications of Research in Education

Volume 7

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In education, as in other fields, there are often significant gaps between research knowledge and current policy and practice. While there are many reasons for this gap, one that stands out is that policy-makers and practitioners may simply not know about important research findings because these findings are not published in forums aimed at them.

Policy Implications of Research in Education aims to clearly and comprehensively present the implications for education policy and practice drawn from important lines of current education research in a manner that is accessible and useful for policy-makers, educational authorities and practitioners.

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Jon Yorke • Lesley Vidovich

Learning Standards and the Assessment of Quality in Higher Education: Contested Policy Trajectories

 Springer

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To Mantz Yorke and Liz Yorke, who made all of this possible, and to Katie, Pippa, Oliver and Daniel for their enduring love and support. (Jon)

To my wonderful, ever-supportive family. In particular, to Tony and Simon with my deepest love, always. (Lesley)

*You can add up the parts,
but you won't have the sum.*

*From the song 'Anthem',
Leonard Cohen (1992)*

Foreword I

If you are inclined to think that major policies are developed by one or a small group of experts in the field – decision makers, they are often called – your confidence in that view should be given a good shake by reading this book. To put this book together, the two authors, Jon Yorke and Lesley Vidovich, have tapped into the thinking and prompts of a considerable number of players in the general field of academic standards and quality in higher education.

The researchers have done this by getting their interviewees to speak freely and frankly about their roles and their experiences in the formulation of policies and processes related to academic standards, quality and accountability. These three aspects are fundamental to anyone working in higher education on the learning and teaching front. And if you follow international developments, you will know that university and college learning and teaching are enjoying renewed interest.

I have been friends with Jon for quite a few years. I have also been actively thinking, discussing, running workshops, delivering keynote addresses, teaching, researching, writing and publishing on the assessment of student learning nearly all my academic life. My focus in recent years has been specifically on academic achievement standards, grading and quality issues in higher education. One of my aims has been to debunk myths when I find them, because many policies and practices have been based on such myths. I have also found that many policies and practices have been based on what happens elsewhere and, if it seems sensible, copying it. A favourite tactic has been to label something implemented elsewhere as ‘best practice’ without digging critically into its assumptions – and previous research findings.

The reason I was included as one of the people Jon interviewed is probably because I have been vocal about the things I find dubious. He and I spent a very pleasurable couple of hours on a balmy day in a quiet picnic shelter on the foreshore at Nudgee Beach with the recorder switched on. Without any conscious effort on our part, our discussion just kept itself on target. The topics we touched on ranged widely, over the knowledge levels, personalities and influences of the people, committees and working parties I had been involved in or knew something about.

My general impression is that academics like a fair amount of stability in their teaching and assessment activities. They intensely dislike having to spend hours completing requirements and box filling when they are not convinced these make any difference to their teaching or student learning. However, if change is in the offing, academics justifiably want to be part of the process and tend to be wary of, or actively resist, waves of so-called innovations imposed from above. 'Above' may be the head of the higher education institution, the head of a purpose-built agency or government department or the relevant Minister or Secretary for Higher Education in the political hierarchy. It makes no difference. Academics like to be consulted, and to think their views matter and their input counts in decision making.

Years ago, I carried out several evaluations of funded educational projects. I also taught and wrote in the field of social programme evaluation. It was not uncommon for us to refer 'the decision maker', as if this would be a single person with authority to make decisions. Some of us naively imagined that this 'decision maker' would read our evaluation reports carefully, analyse the evidence we produced, review any recommendations we made, weigh everything up and then follow through with a rational decision. In most cases, this conception of how decisions are made turned out to be a complete myth. There was no single decision maker. Decisions somehow 'happened', by whom we were not quite sure. There is some parallel with the construction of policies on standards and quality in higher education. Sometimes what seems a good and grand aspiration involves multiple rounds of consultation and refinement and consumes considerable resources but finishes with a bland set of principles that everybody is comfortable but are in fact so general they accommodate most existing practice and nothing much needs to change except at the margins.

This book will give you detailed insights into how a multitude of key decisions, policies and practices have actually been arrived at. It is nearly always a messy process, the result being a set of compromise positions that form the equilibrium point among competing forces – ideological, political, financial, reputational, personal, timing and a few more. What also came over to me is that something I judge to be axiomatic is being seriously overlooked. It is a lack of clarity about what the problem is. If learning standards and quality teaching provide the two main agenda items, we need broad consensus on what these terms mean and what they imply. For example, we need to appreciate the many meanings of 'standards', debate and decide which of them is to constitute the agenda and agree to use the term with only that meaning. Otherwise our discussions become confused. We do the same for teaching or learning 'quality'. This is not the same as saying quality should itself have to be defined. All the pointers are that, as an abstraction, quality can often be recognised in practice even when it cannot be precisely defined. That said, it is nevertheless necessary to be clear about what the entity is whose quality matters to us.

The authors of this book have done well to gain access to so many key people who, one way or another, have been involved in crafting the text of policies that relate to quality, assessment of student learning, accountabilities and learning standards. Such policies typically set the agenda for years at a time. The agenda may be interrupted only when some crisis develops; or a shortage of early signs of success

in pursuing the goal acts as a demotivator; or incremental changes to the context lead to loss of perceived relevance. Then the cycles start again, following broadly similar trajectories. The authors do draw a lot of their data from Australian case studies and players. That is important in being able to see the trajectories over time, but their study also extends internationally. Again, they have been able to obtain access to important policy crafters abroad, especially in the UK, the USA and the international Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

If you are interested in the ways in which provincial, national and international collaborations create well-intended policies and projects, you should read this book. If you already think complex policy development takes some sort of linear, logical path, the authors present information from real players in the field that will challenge you. If you already know the trajectories are convoluted, the authors will tell you a lot more about how it all happens.

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D. Royce Sadler

Foreword II

The history of national quality assurance (Q/A) efforts in higher education worldwide has been relatively short, but unusually turbulent. The establishment of national Q/A agencies in the UK and various countries in Europe dates from the early 1990s, and those in much of the rest of the world – including Australia, the principal focus of this volume – were established shortly afterwards. In the USA, institutional accreditation has a longer history, but was only established as a government-sponsored quality assurance mechanism in the 1960s. In all of these cases, Q/A bodies have become considerably more assertive in the last decade, occasioning proportionate – although not always successful – institutional push-back.

In this book, Jon Yorke and Lesley Vidovich provide an unusually systematic and accessible analysis of the recent evolution of national Q/A systems using Australia as a central case, reinforced by coverage from the UK, the USA and the OECD. The analysis rests on a sound theoretical framework drawn from critical theory and poststructuralism and involved a comprehensive review of relevant documents and face-to-face interviews with a total of 35 informants in Australia and other jurisdictions.

As a long-time researcher on US accreditation (and a dabbler in Q/A in many other countries), I find many compelling insights here. One is the dynamic of actor power and ideological stance with respect to the ‘measurability’ of student learning that Yorke and Vidovich use to unpack the evolution of quality policy in Australia, as well as in the UK and the USA. In each case, the dynamic is initiated by government, a ‘high power’ actor that believes learning to be measurable, with an aggressive accountability initiative (e.g. the so-called Spellings Commission in the USA). But this action is eventually successfully countered by elite institutions (e.g. the Russell Group in the UK), an equally ‘high power’ actor with little faith in the measurability of learning. This cycle of action and reaction between government Q/A agencies and higher education institutions is a particularly good way to analyse this policy trajectory, an approach I have used myself.

A second is Yorke and Vidovich's model of policy influences and trajectories as applied to the Australian case. This is a powerful approach and I believe it will prove useful if adopted by observers in other national contexts beyond this study. One important insight from the application of this model is the growing, and often largely unseen, role of independent nongovernmental actors on the evolution of quality policy, e.g. the Australian Centre for Educational Research (ACER), the Lumina Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in the USA. Another is the ability of astute institutional leaders to take advantage of aggressive accountability mandates to develop locally useful planning and information resources such as internal audits and student learning assessment systems.

In sum, this is a volume that has much to teach both higher education scholars and policy practitioners. I learned a lot from it and I expect many other readers will as well.

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Peter Ewell

Foreword III

A book on this topic is long overdue and very welcome. The rising importance that has been given to quality assurance over the last three decades and the resulting policies and methodologies – in particular, the attempts to use comparative measures of learning as the way to establish quality – are comprehensively examined.

This is a very readable analysis of these policies primarily in Australia, but also in the UK and the USA (plus a consideration of perspectives from the OECD). Within what the book calls the ‘policy terrain’ of accountability and quality, it examines the conceptual themes of globalisation, accountability, quality, learning standards and assessment practices – all of which, as it points out, ‘are complex and heavily contested’. And the way these interrelated ideas and systems are expertly explored means that this book is highly relevant and should be of great interest to all involved in the higher education sector, including those outside Australia.

For me, I especially welcomed the detailed consideration given to the multiple bad assessment practices that are common across the sector which must inevitably bring in to question the reliability and validity of summative assessment decisions – and therefore mean that any quality assurance system making comparisons using that data is a system built on sand.

As a detailed description of the quality assurance story so far, and an insightful consideration of the multiple problems associated with attempting to establish comparative measures of learning, I recommend this book without reservation.

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Christ Rust

Preface

This book sets out to address highly contemporary themes in higher education policy within an era of accelerating globalisation. Issues of learning standards, accountability and quality are hotly debated and related policies are rapidly evolving in many countries. This research explores these highly contested policy terrains, generating findings which will have relevance to those working in the fields of learning standards, assessment, quality and policy development. It will also be of relevance to those scholars examining globalisation and policy trends and to those interested in the application of qualitative research methods and the use of critical discourse analysis.

Within this book, accountability and quality policies relating to learning standards are analysed and their implications for assessment in higher education are examined. Whilst primarily focusing on an Australian case of these global policy agendas, this analysis also extends internationally, in particular to include the UK and the USA, drawing in perspectives from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Across these settings, comparative measures of learning have been seen as a policy ‘solution’ to the problem of ‘proving quality’ in a globalised and increasingly competitive higher education market. Comparative measures of learning depend on the specification of learning standards. Learning standards attempt to articulate the capabilities expected of graduates, and students’ achievement of these is determined through the practices of assessment carried out within institutions. Quality policy, learning standards and assessment practices all intersect within the broader umbrella of accountability, with relevance to governments, higher education providers, employers, parents and students.

The research that underpins this book draws on the theoretical frameworks of critical theory and poststructuralism to enable a comprehensive approach to policy analysis. Critical theory facilitates an examination of the way policy processes serve to empower or disempower actors, whilst the theoretical lens of poststructuralism focuses attention on the complex and dynamic power relationships between actors at all levels. Within the Australian setting, a ‘policy trajectory’ approach is used to

analyse the evolving ‘ensemble’ of quality policy texts relating to learning standards released by the Australian Government between 2009 and 2013. Four policy contexts are examined, comprising (global to local) influences, policy text production, practices/effects and emergent or predicted longer term outcomes. These contexts are examined at a national and institutional level. The ‘national’ level comprises the Australian Government and other nongovernment national groups within Australia. The ‘institutional’ level spans four ‘types’ of public and private institution, selected to represent the hierarchy and diversity of the Australian higher education sector. Quality policy processes relating to learning standards in higher education settings beyond Australia are also examined. In view of the historically strong policy flows from the UK and USA to Australia, perspectives from selected policy actors in these settings are analysed alongside the Australian policy trajectory study. In addition, the perspectives of a participant from the OECD are also included in view of the growing influence of this organisation on national-level policy processes. In all, the research is based on interviews conducted with 35 participants between 2012 and 2013. These included government policy elite members, institutional leaders, policy researchers and leaders of national projects within the domain of learning standards. Critical discourse analysis of extracts from five key policy texts was undertaken within the Australian national setting.

The findings reported in this book highlight a number of policy influences, including the rising demands for national and international comparative data on learning standards to compare quality and inform student choice in a globally competitive market. Processes of policy text production have been characterised by intense struggles over the ownership and control of learning standards, strongly driven by vested and competitive interests. The practices/effects emerging in response to proposed policies have included defensive manoeuvring by the higher education sector, which strove to fend off government intrusion. Longer term outcomes may potentially impact assessment practices through a narrowing of the curriculum and reduction of academic freedom if external tests of learning standards are introduced in future. Despite policy rhetoric to address equity issues, there is little evidence to suggest that equity will improve.

Fifteen theoretical propositions, of potentially wider relevance, were synthesised from the Australian policy trajectory study and the perspectives of participants from beyond Australia (i.e. UK, USA and OECD). A key integrating theme of ideology and power is identified and analysed. Taken together, the findings of this research suggest that an excessive reliance on narrow quantitative indicators designed to measure, compare and improve quality may only serve to weaken it. In later sections of the book, the policy trajectory approach used to examine the Australian setting is critiqued and combined with network theory to further develop theoretical framings for future policy analysis. The book concludes by identifying a number of implications for the development of quality policy relating to learning standards and for future research.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the contribution made by our participants. Many of these people were very senior and extremely busy, yet all contributed a substantial piece of their time to take part in the interviews. We have learned much from those conversations and are delighted to be able to share their knowledge and experiences with a wider audience.

Perth, Australia
Perth, Australia

Jon Yorke
Lesley Vidovich

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Abbreviations

ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
AHELO	Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (OECD)
ALTC	Australian Learning and Teaching Council
AQF	Australian Qualifications Framework
ATN	Australian Technology Network [Australian Universities]
AUQA	Australian Universities Quality Agency
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CEQ	Course Experience Questionnaire [Australia]
CLA	Collegiate Learning Assessment [US]
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [Australia]
DIICCSRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Climate Change, Science, Research and Tertiary Education [Australia]
DIISRTE	Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education [Australia]
EU	European Union
Go8	Group of Eight [Australian Universities]
GSA	Graduate Skills Assessment
HESP	Higher Education Standards Panel [Australia]
IRU	Innovative Research Universities [Australian Universities]
LTAS	Learning and Teaching Academic Standards project [Australia]
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy [Australia]
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
OLT	Office for Learning and Teaching [Australia]
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment [OECD]
SES	Socioeconomic status
TEQSA	The Australian Tertiary Quality and Standards Agency
TLOs	Threshold learning outcomes
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VSA	Voluntary System of Accountability [US]