Higher Education Research at Deakin University

Professor Marcia Devlin
Chair in Higher Education Research
Deakin University

Introduction

There is much complexity to the term ‘higher education research’. This paper explores the notion and provides some background for ongoing discussion with members of the College of Distinguished Deakin Educators (CDDE) and other staff stakeholders at Deakin University.

Higher education: Towards a discipline?

Higher education is a field of professional practice and a field of inquiry, not a discipline. Research and scholarship in higher education is undertaken from a range of disciplines, perspectives, orientations, theories, philosophies and conceptions. I will return to this point later.

What is research in higher education?

Research in higher education is focused across a wide range of themes and topics. Much of it falls into the following categories:
• Teaching and learning;
• Curriculum and course design;
• The student experience;
• Academic work;
• Institutional management;
• Quality; and
• Policy
(Adapted from Tight, 2004).

This is by no means an exhaustive list but does provide an indicative list of where much higher education research is undertaken.

The quality of higher education scholarship and research

As is the case in many universities globally, Deakin seeks to “…pursue knowledge of teaching and learning both for the purpose of its development and improvement and for the advancement of scholarship” (D’Andrea, 2006, p. 90). There is a growing number of staff at Deakin interested in investigating various aspects of their teaching and their students’ learning and broader experience, as well as other higher education topics. It is vitally important that this interest is harnessed and that the highest standards of scholarship and research possible are applied to each and every investigation that Deakin undertakes. The CDDE members have a leadership role in this endeavour.

The quality research is dependent on a number of factors and dimensions. These include appropriate preparatory groundwork; clear research questions, the theoretical framework(s) used; appropriate methods and methodology and publication outlets.
Preparatory groundwork

Like all research fields, the higher education research field has a body of literature related to the theory, policy, practice and various other aspects of the field. All higher education researchers and scholars would be expected to be well-versed in the relevant literature. While this does not necessarily mean that you would need to conduct a full literature review on higher education research every time you undertake an investigation of your teaching, for example, a certain command of the literature around your particular topic/area and research questions would be appropriate.

Such knowledge and understanding is a commonly held assumption for those who excel in various aspects of higher education teaching and learning. The criteria for excellent teaching used by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education) include ‘development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field’. This, of course, includes ‘demonstrating up-to-date knowledge of the field of study in the design of the curriculum and the creation of resources for learning’. Deakin University’s Vice-Chancellor’s Awards for Excellent Contributions use the same criteria as the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) for Teaching Awards.

Clear research question(s)

Once a topic or area for research has been identified, it is critical to frame research and scholarship in higher education with a central question or set of questions. Researchers’ own disciplinary background and expertise may help guide efforts here. The essence of a research question is that it clearly defines what, exactly, you are looking for, or at, and why. An added advantage will be that the scope of what is investigated will be limited by research questions with a manageable focus, thereby increasing the likelihood of completion of an investigation and of higher quality research than would otherwise be the case.

As I have argued elsewhere, it is ideal to align the research question(s) with Deakin’s mission and core commitments, wherever possible and feasible. Deakin’s foci provide a broad range of areas in which to conduct research and scholarship. Two examples given previously are investigating one or more aspects of flexibility in teaching and learning and examining teaching students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Devlin, 2008). Other possible areas related to Deakin’s strategic plan might include partnerships of various kinds, aspects of rural and regional engagement and continuing education, to name a few. Of course, detailed, specific research questions would need to be developed from these broad areas.

Theoretical framework

There are a large number of theoretical and/or conceptual frameworks and perspectives and disciplinary backgrounds applied to higher education research. These include a number one might expect, such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, linguistics, politics and management as well as those that might not be obviously applicable, such as economics, anthropology and biology (Tight, 2004). There is, in fact, no barrier to the application of a disciplinary perspective to higher education research, other than that it have relevance to the investigation being undertaken and that this relevance be articulated.
While it is not mandatory that a theoretical and/or conceptual framework be applied to research and scholarship in higher education, such application strengthens the work in many cases and provides an additional type of investigation to supplement the two most common genres identified by Tight (2004): the small scale evaluative study (although this may in some cases be theorised) and the descriptive policy analysis or critique.

**Appropriate methods and methodologies**

The terms ‘method’ and ‘methodology’ are often used interchangeably to refer to the way in which a topic or issue is investigated. Some suggest a distinction between *methods of inquiry* and *methodological approach* is critical, although it is often acknowledged that they will be related to each other. However, at the risk of offending some, given the extensive evidence of interchangeable use of the terms in the literature, and of widespread confusion about the difference, it is recommended that we take the broad understanding that method/methodology means the way(s) in which a topic or issue is examined, including the tools and techniques, and conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks applied to the investigation.

Higher education research and scholarship is undertaken using a range of methods and methodologies, which overlap. These include, but are not limited to:
- Document analysis;
- Interviews;
- Questionnaires;
- Conceptual analysis;
- Statistical analysis;
- Observation;
- Auto/biographical documentation;
- Phenomenography; and
- Comparative analysis (adapted from Tight, 2004).

Levels or units of analysis can include: individual teacher or student; subject or unit of study; course/program; department/school/faculty; institution; nation/system; and/or international system, among others.

Listing the various options in this way can lead to the inference on the part of the reader that ‘anything goes’ in terms of higher education research. In fact, the absence of one set of ‘rules’ for this research means it is critical that researchers are certain of the conceptual and/or theoretical framework within which they are working and with which they will form their research questions, choose their methods and interpret and report their results. The aim is rigorous and systematic investigation and this is not possible without a clear articulation and application of a framework.

**Publishing research and scholarship**

As I have also argued elsewhere, ensuring a feedback loop to stakeholders will ensure that research and scholarship are not just ends in themselves (Devlin, 2008). International peer-reviewed journals and book chapters are the most desirable avenues of communication as these have the most impact in a number of ways. They are read by a larger audience than something that is presented or published locally and can, therefore, have wider impact. These sorts of publications also carry more currency in terms of research assessment exercises and the federal government’s Higher Education Research Data Collection processes. An additional
benefit of international peer-reviewed publications is that the profile that results from these will contribute to the likelihood of international and national research and scholarship collaborations.

While other options, such as contributions to international or local conferences, presentations at school or discipline-group meetings, web publishing of case studies and the like are desirable, it is hoped that Deakin staff will increasingly aim for the higher publication tiers for all the reasons stated.

The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) Initiative currently underway to develop a research quality assurance system will have implications for research in higher education, including research publications, research income and research training. It is important that member so the CDDE and Deakin University more broadly are actively engaged in discussion about this system as it takes shape and comes into effect.

Conclusion

Ideally, higher education research at Deakin University, including investigations into teaching and learning, should be grounded in appropriate literature; guided by clear, articulated research questions; framed by appropriate disciplinary, theoretical and/or conceptual perspectives; carried out with meticulous adherence to appropriate methodology and methods; and published in arenas recognised for their international excellence.

References

