# Editorial: Critical social research

## Lee Harvey

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

EDITORIAL

Check for updates

# Editorial: Critical social research

In May 2021, Susan Halford, British Sociological Association President wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Leicester University expressing very deep concern about the proposed closure of the Critical Management Studies and Political Economy programme. As of August 2021, most academics associated with the course were made redundant *because* they taught and researched 'critical' material. They were not poor teachers or researchers but the fact that they published in journals that had the word 'critical' in their title was used as evidence in hearings to make them redundant. Despite an intense campaign with petitions, expressions of support from professional associations and high-profile academics, national media coverage, a union supported boycott of the university and a strike, critical voices have now been purged from the university. Halford's principal concern was about the closure of a sociology-oriented course, this editorial is more concerned about the closure of a *critical* course.

Indeed, it is time for more, not less critical research: this journal welcomes critical social research above all other forms. There has been a marked paucity of critical social research in the journal, which is rather overwhelmed by quantitative studies and small-scale qualitative endeavours. While the published work of this kind is satisfactory, it rarely digs beneath the surface of taken-for-granted views; effectively reinforcing the *status quo*.

In *Quality in Higher Education* volume 28 issue 2, the nature of critical social research was outlined. Critical social research is informed by critical epistemology, a view that knowledge develops through critique and is constrained by history and structure. In essence, critical social research requires locating events in a wider historical and social setting and, in so doing, deconstructing taken-for-granteds and reconstructing an alternative understanding.

In this issue, there are seven articles that deconstruct concepts or approaches and offer an alternative way of thinking about quality issues.

Anne L.L. Tang, Vincent Wing Sun Tung, Caroline Walker-Gleaves and Julie Rattray argue that care is a neglected element of quality processes. Good quality teaching and learning includes care. Conceptualisations of quality should involve teacher care, which is beneficial to learning. The growing prevalence of neoliberalism has led to a market-driven, authoritarian, hierarchical and top-down approach to accountability, rather than enhancement of learning. A caring approach contributes to facilitating students' learning and helping them cope with difficulties and distress in the expanded higher education environment.

Furthermore, the increasing and over-reliance on line managers to devise, execute and oversee accountability systems has removed academics as key decision-makers on quality matters, eroding their autonomy, de-professionalising them and creating an ethos of distrust that is detrimental to quality enhancement. Despite this, there are caring university teachers. Three types of care are identified. Pedagogical care that aims to facilitate students' learning. Holistic care promotes students' academic learning and holistic development. Relational care is about creating learning

experiences underpinned by high quality teacher-student relationships. The article investigates university students' perceptions of teacher care and affirms that students perceive all forms of teacher care as important with relational care the most important. The article proposes a caring quality mechanism for quality enhancement to address the inadequacy of the audit-focused quality system.

Weng Marc Lim, Ida Fatimawati Adi Badiozaman and Hugh John Leong argue that although studies show a positive correlation between student engagement and student development further scrutiny of the determinants of student engagement, especially teacher behaviour, from the perspective of students is necessary. Their survey of students in four higher education institutions in Sarawak, Malaysia, examines the expectation-performance gaps in teacher behaviour from the student perspective and shows that teacher behaviour had a positive and significant impact on student engagement.

They examine the meta-effects of teacher behaviour that extends understanding of a relationship that was previously limited to second-order variations (such as, clarity of instruction, learning environment). In particular, they show the importance of listening to students in order to enhance the quality of interactions. Promoting dialogic relationships with students potentially changes the power relationship between student and teacher but enables nuanced understanding of expected teacher behaviour and thus of what teachers can do to enhance student engagement. For example, the study showed a large gap between the expectation of providing helpful study guidance and advice and the fulfilment of that expectation. Addressing the perceived expectation-performance gap involves some radical reconfiguring of the student-teacher relationship.

Małgorzata Dzimińska explores Polish student's visions of the ideal university and the concomitant notion of quality. Rather than the excellence or fitness for purpose approaches so much heralded by league tables and quality agencies, she showed that students strongly embrace the concept of quality as transformation. Transformational quality refers to the change that students experience through the learning process in which they deconstruct concepts and build alternative conceptualisations. Enhancement and empowerment are manifested in facets of transformation including intellectual, critical, personal, emotional and physical development.

By deconstructing the notion of the ideal university and thereby identifying key elements that support deep student transformation, the study revealed implications for quality management and quality assurance in the higher education context. A university that seeks to promote quality as transformation incubates the intellectual, critical, personal, emotional and physical development of students. Transformative learning promotes active and deep learning, encourages students to take responsibility for and ownership of their learning and provides opportunities for increased student empowerment.

Carter Bloch, Simon Fuglsang, Johanne Grøndahl Glavind and Anna-Kathrine Bendtsen argue that the literature on quality tends to overlook the processes and practices constituting 'every-day' quality: referred to as quality work. Rather than explore the abstract notion of quality they wanted to ground it in everyday practices to see what really mattered to students, teachers, administrative staff and managers at higher education institutions. There was a surprising amount of agreement (given participants could only indicate their very highest priorities) in what were the key elements across the Danish higher education system, with continual development of

teaching and curriculum, active teaching approaches and critical reasoning being preeminent.

There are, though, areas with differences, notably employability or market orientation: university colleges and business academies tend to prioritise employability more than universities. However, such differences are not as pronounced as could be expected, with university-based respondents of the view that employability should be promoted in a way that does not detract from the academic value of education. The study that focused on quality work at the local level revealed that respondents typically argued for focus on general development that does not adhere to restrictive standards. Bloch *et al.* conclude that a focus on quality work results in a much greater consensus on what is most important, despite high levels of local autonomy to enact quality work differently at different institutions.

Eleonora Erittu and Matteo Turri critiqued internal quality assurance units. Their study examined the ways Italian universities develop and structure quality assurance and the relationship between internal quality units and other actors inside and outside the university. They invoke the view that higher education institutions respond to external quality assurance in three ways: quality, management, quality culture and quality work. The latter focuses on actors' behaviours and is more practice-oriented than the other responses and is not standardised and pre-determined. Quality work is a dynamic interpretation drawing on institutional norms, idiosyncratic preferences and interests. Their study shows that quality work is very significant. Although there is homogeneity in the activities of internal units the response to external quality assurance by the universities are not predetermined and quality work varies by size of institution and its public or private status.

The results show that quality work is central in determining the success of quality assurance. Key is the autonomy institutions have in designing quality assurance processes that integrate with administrative functions and information systems in an effort to focus on micro-processes. The internal unit is not only an agent of the university academic top management but also assumes its own autonomy by fostering dialogue between different actors with their own expectations: between external accountability and internal accountability, between academia and administration, between students and professors, between community demands and internal university logic.

Paul Gibbs is not concerned with quality processes as such but argues for a reconceptualisation of the discipline structure of higher education. He argues that transdisciplinarity provides a less restricted mode of thinking and engenders a context that enhances the quality of learning.

Transdisciplinarity knowledge is framed as distinct from disciplinary knowledge modes and especially distinct from interdisciplinarity. Gibbs maintains that transdisciplinarity is transformative and requires the deconstruction of the role of the institution of higher education as a sole provider of higher conceptual learning and of the corporation as self-servicing, profit optimising entity. Instead, a transdisciplinary curriculum is flexible in duration, location and practice. Assessment is by achievement and undertaken by all those whose judgement on the professional candidate's practice is required for admittance to a particular community of practice.

Alana Hoare and Pamela Goad undertook a small-scale American-Canadian detailed qualitative study showing that dominant quantitative measures of student success (retention, persistence, graduation, employment rates) fall short of measuring the environmental factors and represent a false narrative of student success. They

adopted a qualitative approach to explore local variability and amplify the lived experiences of students, uncovering the diverse meanings of student success that cannot be isolated through quantitative research. The research identified seven key themes: engagement; relationships and empowerment; health and well-being; economic; academic; navigating institutional processes; personal growth and resilience. Participants acknowledged that some themes were more difficult to measure (such as health and well-being, and personal growth and resilience) and that students' experiences are unique and subjective. The results contributed to the development of five principles for culturally responsive postsecondary performance measurement that include participatory, emergent and appreciative processes and qualitative evaluation methodologies.

Oliver Vettori raises the issue of time. He argues that time is an omnipresent force in our daily lives but that the temporal patterns of higher education are taken for granted and are rarely deconstructed, especially when examining quality assurance. He takes a chronopolitical perspective to show how internal and external quality assurance structure time by imposing temporal norms on higher education quality assurance. Chronopolitics describes the relation of temporality within a broader (political) context, which in the case of higher education refers to how the politics of time governs academic knowledge generation, epistemic entities, academic management and academic lives. Quality assurance mechanisms impose temporal norms regarding tempo, rhythm, timespans, timescales and time ownership on higher education institutions and the people working and learning there.

He explores three aspects in detail: how periodicity and rhythm of different quality assurance review and strategy cycles govern institutional improvement opportunities; how timescales and time budgets shift the relationship between temporal resources and improvement actions; and how the regularity and continuity of quality assurance affects outcomes. The conclusion is that the chronopolitics of quality assurance is far from beneficial in the desire to encourage continuous improvement. The temporal norms are frequently counterproductive and end up with undue attention paid to short-term micro-changes in 'quality', however measured. He argues for more reflexivity regarding the temporalities of quality assurance in higher education and a more conscious treatment of time in all its dimensions when devising or implementing quality assurance mechanisms.

Although the various studies do not entirely meet the conception of praxiological, dialectical, ideological deconstructive critical social research (Harvey [1990] 2022), they do attempt to breakdown taken-for-granted approaches and views and offer alternative perspectives and ways of working.

## Reference

Harvey, L., [1990] 2022, *Critical Social Research* (London, Unwin Hyman). Available at: http://www.qualityresearchinternational.com/csr/ (accessed 15 November 2022).

Lee Harvey
✉ leecolinharvey@gmail.com

Check for updates