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QUALITY APPRAISAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION RESEARCH: AN ACTION-ORIENTED, PROCESS-BASED ALTERNATIVE TO PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

from

The University of Wollongong

by

Susanne J. Curtis, B.Ed., M.Stud.Ed.

Centre for Research Policy
1996

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ALR	Australian Left Review
ANU	Australian National University
ARC	Australian Research Council
ASTEC	Australian Science and Technology Council
CASMAC	Core Australian Specification for Management and Administrative Computing System
CCGI	Commonwealth Competitive Grants Index
CRC	Co-operative Research Centre
CSIRO	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
CTEC	Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission
DEET	Department of Employment, Education and Training
DITAC	Department of Industry Trade and Commerce
DVC	Deputy Vice Chancellor
EIP	Evaluations and Investigations Program
HES	Higher Education Supplement
NBEET	National Board of Employment, Education and Training
NCGI	National Competitive Grants Index
NH&MRC	National Health & Medical Research Council
NUDist	Non-numerical Unstructured Data indexing, searching and theorising
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCT	Personal Construct Theory
PDCA	Plan, Do, Think, Act
PhD	Doctor of Philosophy
PI	Performance Indicators
PVC	Pro-Vice Chancellor
R&D	Research and Development
RFM	Relative Funding Model
RGC	Research Grants Committee
RMU	Research Management Unit
SSM	Soft Systems Methodology
STEP	Science Technology and Economic Policy
TQM	Total Quality Management
UNS	Unified National System
VC	Vice Chancellor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thanks must go first of all to those who participated in the study because their contributions made the inquiry possible. Their willingness to examine their own research practices and to share their understanding about the value of action for research, was the foundation of the study. It was a privilege to share with these people their personal experiences in their commitment to the pursuit of quality research practices.

The study was supported by a postgraduate research scholarship awarded by the Centre for Research Policy at the University of Wollongong. The Centre provided an exceptionally well-resourced environment for research and direct access to an extensive network of information sources at all levels of higher education policy. My thanks go to my supervisor Stephen Hill, who gave me the freedom and the determination both to tackle the challenges that the research presented and to pursue the answers to questions that emerged in the process of the inquiry. Colleagues at the Centre for Research Policy provided me with support and encouragement and for this I am very grateful, especially Tim Turpin who took over supervision responsibilities at the eleventh hour. In particular I would like to thank my best friend and steadfast supporter in all matters academic, Heather Spence. With the multiplicity of software that I used in the inquiry processes, technical support and creative application were always needed and always available from Dave Shaw. Dave's willingness to contribute his time and expertise to the development requirements for the appraisal tool has been invaluable, as has his assistance, right to the end, in formatting the thesis document. My thanks also go to my colleagues in the Personal Construct Psychology group at the University of Wollongong. Chris Stevens' insights helped me to find the elusive missing link in the design of the tool. Sue Nagy was a constant support at all levels, as friend, advocate and academic advisor.

The Centre for Research Policy's involvement in a national Doctoral Program in Science, Technology and Economic Progress (STEP), afforded me access to a wide range of expertise and support that would otherwise have been well-beyond my academic experience. The University of Wollongong administration too, provided funding for national and international conference presentations. These experiences were invaluable both in developing contacts and in broadening the horizons of my understanding about the inquiry in which I was engaged. I am particularly indebted to the Action Learning, Action Research and Process Management Association for their inspirational conferences and informative literature.

ABSTRACT

The policy themes currently steering Australian higher education research practice, have given rise to an output-oriented, performance-based, quality appraisal framework that is oriented towards narrowly conceived accountability purposes. Because it is so narrowly conceived, this framework is both inadequate for quality appraisal purposes and insufficient for legitimating and rewarding research practice. The thesis argues that with this appraisal framework, both the physical and cognitive infrastructures that sustain research activity are being put at risk. This is because performance-based measures cannot recognise or reward the processes that secure, sustain and renew flexibility and responsiveness in research pursuits.

The thesis proposes that process-oriented indicators based on effective action for research, could provide an alternative but complementary appraisal option for legitimation and reward of the full range of activities involved in quality research practice. However, a quality appraisal tool that could accommodate the full range of activity for research would necessarily have to incorporate processes for making explicit what it is that researchers experience as effective action for research. In developing such a tool, this thesis contributes towards the provision of an alternative theoretical and methodological framework for quality appraisal practices that are congruent with, and grounded in, effective action for research.

FOREWORD

This PhD study has been undertaken in the context of a broader research program. The broader program is one that is driven by the researcher's long-standing interest in action that facilitates learning, and hence identity-formation. It is this interest that also motivates the present inquiry.

Human understanding and identity-formation are made possible by the action involved in attributing meaning and value to experience.[1,2] In questions of value, and the attribution of merit and worth to everyday activities, it is human understanding as 'mechanism', that is of interest to the present study. The infinite adaptability of this 'mechanism' has led inquirers in the naturalistic paradigms[3] of social inquiry, to speak in terms of human-as-instrument.[4] While human-as-instrument is a powerful mechanism for enhancing reason and action,[5] it can function just as effectively as a means of controlling action through the institutionalisation of ways of knowing and acting.[6] As Berger and Luckman note, '. . . man (sic) is capable paradoxically of producing a reality that denies him'.[7] The potential for institutionalisation of action in the form of systems of legitimation and reward, to deny the intended meaning in everyday practice, is the focus of the first strand of the present

---

1 Bruner, J. S. & Anglin, J. M. (1973) *Beyond the Information Given : Studies in the Psychology of Knowing*, George Allen & Unwin, London, pp.xx-38.

2 Schutz, A. (1972) *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert, Heinemann Educational Books, London, Ch.2.

3 Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*, Sage, Newbury Park, California p.84.

4 Guba, E. G. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1981) *Effective Evaluation : Improving the Usefulness of Evaluation Results Through Responsive and Naturalistic Approaches*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Ch. 6.

5 Guba, E.G. & Lincoln, Y.S. (1989), op. cit., pp.174-177.

6 Agyris, C., Putnam, R. & McLean Smith, D. (1985) *Action Science : Concepts, Methods, and Skills for Research and Intervention*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp.88-96.

7 Berger, P. L. & Luckman, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Allen Lane, London, pp.107-108.

study. The sustainability of spheres of social life can be undermined if the values inherent in broader, institutionalised systems of legitimation and reward are privileged over those that facilitate everyday practice. It is the inadequacy of institutionalised action, for the coordination of social systems,[8] in the form of system-level, legitimation and reward of higher education research, therefore, that is a primary concern which motivates the present study.

Legitimation and reward systems can affirm the value of action for everyday practice, and in so doing, facilitate the formation of personal identity within a sphere of social life[9] such as research. However, if they fail to affirm important aspects of a sphere of social life that are necessary for its sustainability and renewal, legitimation and reward systems can also serve to deny the value of action and undermine identity formation.

Spheres of social life are maintained through the intentional action of individuals, who structure their lives from the perspective of a particular life view, or values framework.[10] The meaning and value of individual social action is, therefore, to a large extent, also predetermined by its historical context and the institutionalised structures of previous social action which serve sustainability and renewal.[11] Institutionalisation of spheres of social life[12] can be seen in particular and recognisable forms of language, activities and social relations.[13] Language becomes institutionalised as it takes on specific forms for everyday purposes in specific contexts. Activities are institutionalised in accepted daily practice. Patterns of social relations are institutionalised in the form of organisations.

---

8 McTaggart, R. (1991) *Action Research: A Short Modern History*, Deakin University Press, Geelong, pp.85-86.

9 Habermas, J. (1987) *The Theory of Communicative Action, Volume Two: The Critique of Functionalist Reason,* trans. Thomas McCarthy, Polity Press, Cambridge, pp.181-185.

10 Ibid., p.142.

11 Bernstein, R.J. (1983) *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis*, Basil Blackwell Publisher Limited, Oxford, p.142.

12 McTaggart, R. (1991) op. cit., p.83.

13 Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (eds) (1988) *The Action Research Planner*, Deakin University Press, Geelong, p.82.

Research, by its nature, has institutionalised contestation of accepted ways of understanding and acting which are embedded in existing forms of knowledge, institutions and social practices. If contestation is absent, there can be no dialectical shaping of the meaning and value of action as circumstances change.[14] In this sense, contestation is essential to research as a sphere of social life. Without contestation of established knowledge, the flexibility, and therefore sustainability, of meaning-making structures could be put at risk.[15]

The contradiction between institutionalisation and contestation is the mechanism by which continued interaction between old and emerging, more effective new ways of understanding and valuing action, are sustained. Whatever the sphere of social life, the dialectical interaction between contestation and institutionalisation is the process by which growth in knowledge about the value of action for intended purposes and sustainability of the meaning of social roles in everyday practice, are possible. Kemmis and McTaggart use the metaphor of the ocean shore to explain the nature of this dialectical interaction.

> . . . contestation and institutionalisation are opposed in interaction like the wave motion and the movement of the tides that shapes a shoreline; contestation is the wave action, institutionalisation the changing land form, bearing the history of the sea's action and shaping the possibilities for future action. They are mutually constitutive aspects of the historical processes of social formation.[16]

At a substantive level, the present study focuses on activities which shape the value of action for research, as a form of social life. The focus for exploring this shaping process is the action that facilitates or constrains higher education research practice. This focus has been selected because it serves to contrast the type of action which sustains and renews research as a sphere of social life, with that which constrains or undermines research practice, by legitimising and rewarding ineffective action. In the present study,

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14 Ibid., p.82.

15 Habermas, J. (1982) 'A Reply to My Critics', in Thompson, J.B. & Held, D. (eds.) (1982) *Habermas: Critical Debates*, Macmillan Press Ltd., London, pp. 279-281.

16 Kemmis, S. & McTaggart, R. (eds.) (1988) op. cit., p.40.

the building of a framework and methodological tool based on enhancing continually, understanding about facilitative action for research, serves to demonstrate what is missing from institutionalised, system-level, legitimation and reward systems for research in higher education. In the process, the study both develops and refines an alternative legitimation and reward option for valuing higher education research, that has the potential to sustain a healthy dialectic between contestation and institutionalisation of action in knowledge-generating communities.