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Bridging the Divide: A comparative analysis of articles in higher education journals published inside and outside North America

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Abstract. Articles published in three leading North American higher education journals during the year 2000 are compared with those published in three leading, English language, non-North American higher education journals (and with a larger sample of fourteen such journals). The comparison focuses on the location of their authors, the themes researched, the levels at which the analyses are pitched, the methods and methodologies employed, and the explicitness of both methodological and theoretical engagement. Compared to the non-North American sample, the North American articles evidence a dominance of North American-based authors, a greater focus on the student experience, and on institutional and national level studies, and a much stronger emphasis on multivariate analysis as a method. Articles in the North American sample were also more likely to be both methodologically and theoretically explicit. Possible reasons for the divergent patterns observed are identified and discussed.

Keywords: comparative analysis, higher education research, journal articles, methodologies, themes, theories

Introduction

The study of higher education is, unsurprisingly, closely linked to the growth of higher education itself. Hence, the countries where higher education research first developed as a significant activity were those where mass higher education systems were first established: the United States and Canada. Closely associated with this development were the establishment of chairs in higher education, programmes studying higher education (typically at postgraduate level) and academic journals focusing on higher education: in other words, all the paraphernalia of an emerging academic discipline (Altbach and Engberg 2001). More recently, mass higher education systems have been developed in other countries, including in western Europe, Australasia and parts of the Asian Pacific Rim, with a concomitant increase in interest in those countries in higher education research (Sadlak and Altbach 1997).

While higher education research remains a developing field, it has nevertheless already become the object of study itself, both in North America (e.g. Silverman 1987; Volkwein et al 1988; Milam 1991; Kezar 2000; Hutchinson and Lovell 2004) and more generally (e.g. Ross 1992; Tight 1999, 2003, 2004a, 2004b). It may now be timely, then, to compare how the field is developing in North America and elsewhere, see what if any differences there may be, and offer some possible explanations for the patterns observed. This article seeks to start such an examination in an exploratory fashion by focusing on articles published in selected specialist higher education journals – based in North America and elsewhere – in the year 2000.

The remainder of the article is organised in four main sections. First, the methodology of the analysis is outlined. Then, the published journal articles are compared in terms of the location of their authors, the themes researched, the levels at which their analyses are pitched, the methods and methodologies employed, and the explicitness of both methodological and theoretical engagement. Possible reasons for the patterns observed are then advanced and discussed, before, finally, some conclusions are drawn.

Methodology and analysis

In a previous study (Tight 2003), I identified 17 English language, specialist higher education journals published outside of North America (the location of their editorial offices at the time is indicated in parentheses):

Active Learning in Higher Education (UK)
Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education (UK)
European Journal of Education (France/Spain)
Higher Education (Australia/Germany/UK/USA)
Higher Education in Europe (Romania)
Higher Education Management (UK)
Higher Education Policy (France)
Higher Education Quarterly (UK)
Higher Education Research and Development (Australia)
Higher Education Review (UK)
International Journal for Academic Development (Australia/Canada/UK)
Journal of Geography in Higher Education (UK)

Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management (Australia)
Quality in Higher Education (UK)
Studies in Higher Education (UK)
Teaching in Higher Education (UK)
Tertiary Education and Management (UK)

The analysis focused on the 406 articles that were published in those journals during the year 2000, examining the characteristics of the authors, the themes or issues explored, the methods or methodologies applied, and the levels at which the analyses were carried out. The study was then extended to consider the extent of theoretical engagement evident in the articles (Tight 2004b).

For the analysis, copies of all of the articles were obtained and read, and their themes or issues, and methods or methodologies, were categorised in terms of a series of keywords. The keywords were then reviewed and grouped together to give a manageable number of categories. Where more than one theme or issue, or method or methodology, was involved, the dominant one was identified. In the vast majority of cases this was a relatively straightforward process.

The categorisation of a small sample of the articles, including the few more problematic cases, was discussed and checked with a colleague. Of course, as other published analyses of this kind demonstrate (e.g. Silverman 1987; Volkwein et al 1988; Millam 1991; Teichler 1996; Frackmann 1997; Hayden and Parry 1997), other researchers would almost certainly have come up with somewhat different categorisations if they were carrying out the same study. However, that does not invalidate the conclusions drawn here.

The eight key themes or issues identified were: teaching and learning, course design, the student experience, quality, system policy, institutional management, academic work and knowledge. The eight methods or methodologies identified were: documentary analysis, comparative analysis, interviews, surveys and multivariate analyses, conceptual analysis, phenomenography, critical/feminist perspectives, and auto/biographical and observational studies.

This latter categorisation could be criticised for conflating methods with methodologies. It includes both approaches typically identified as methods – i.e. documents, interviews, questionnaires, observations: the mainstay of most social research methods texts (e.g. Punch 1998; Cohen et al. 2000; Blaxter et al. 2001) – and those which most would classify as methodologies, such as phenomenography, and comparative, conceptual and critical analyses. But this categorisation has been empirically

derived, and reflects how these matters are dealt with in the articles studied: some accounts stress methods, others methodology, and some mention neither. Some employ the terms "method" and "methodology" in overlapping senses, so, to reflect these varied practices, I will make use of the compound term method/ology.

A strength of this categorisation is that it allows the separate identification of less popular approaches alongside the dominant social research strategies. Thus, phenomenography – "the empirical study of the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around us are experienced, conceptualised, understood, perceived and apprehended" (Marton 1994, p. 4424) – has been included as a separate category not because its use is widespread, but because it is, arguably, the only methodology to have been substantially developed within higher education research. Similarly, conceptual, critical and feminist approaches have been highlighted in order to draw attention to the extent to which researchers from these backgrounds have engaged in higher education research (or, at least, have published the results of their engagement in higher education journals).

The identification of the seven levels of analysis was a much simpler process: the individual (student or academic); the course, or group of students and their teacher(s); the department, school or centre; the institution, university or college; the nation; the system, or idealised arrangement of higher education; and the international. One further level – the region, lying between the institution and the nation – had originally been identified, but it turned out that none of the (non-North American) articles originally analysed focused at this level (though one of the North American articles subsequently analysed did).

Method/ological explicitness was rated as a yes/no dichotomous variable: either the method and/or methodology was clearly, if perhaps briefly, set out, or it wasn't. Finally, theoretical explicitness was judged on a slightly more extended, three-point scale:

- Explicit: the word "theory" is used, and one or more theories are identified, discussed and applied. Alternatively, analogous terms – such as concept, model or paradigm – are introduced and employed in a similar fashion.
- Evident: theories – or concepts, models, paradigms and so forth – are effectively identified, discussed and applied, but the language of theories, concepts, etc., is not explicitly used.
- None: the presentation and discussion – while theory is, arguably, inevitably implicit – is wholly a-theoretical.

For the current comparative analysis, the output (in the same year, 2000) of three leading North American academic journals focusing on higher education – *Journal of Higher Education*, *Research in Higher Education* and *Review of Higher Education* – was examined. The analytical framework just outlined was employed again, and proved straightforward to apply.

Of course, both the number of North American journals examined and their combined article output is rather lower than that in the non-North American sample. It might also be said that the range of non-North American journals analysed, while all in principal refereed journals, is of a more variable overall quality. For this reason, a sub-set of the non-North American sample, again consisting of three journals, has also been identified for analysis. This sub-set comprises what many would identify as the leading UK-based higher education journal, *Studies in Higher Education* (and here I must declare an interest, as the current editor of that journal), the leading Australasian-based higher education journal, *Higher Education Research and Development*, and the leading non-North American international higher education journal, *Higher Education*.

The analysis which follows, therefore, is a comparison of the output of three samples of higher education journals in the year 2000:

1. Three North American-based journals (labelled NA3 in the tables that follow; $n = 79$).
2. Three non-North American journals (labelled E3; $n = 87$).
3. The remaining 14 non-North American journals (labelled E14; $n = 319$) from the group of 17 analysed.

While it may be the case that 2000 was an unusual year for some of the journals, initial checks suggest that any atypicality would not be such as to cause major changes to the conclusions reached. Ideally, of course, a more fine-grained analysis (i.e. than simply comparing "North America" with "non-North America") would be attempted, but that would need to cover several years and would constitute a substantial undertaking.

Results

The comparisons presented will examine in turn the location of the authors of the articles, the themes addressed by the articles, the level at

which their analyses were pitched, the method/ologies employed, and the extent of method/ological and theoretical engagement.

Location of authors

Table 1 breaks down the three samples in terms of the countries in which the authors of the articles were based at the time of publication. The three samples had similar ranges and means for the number of authors per article (means: NA3 = 1.9, E3 = 2.0, E14 = 1.6). What is most striking in the table is the dominance of North American-based authors in the North American journal sample: 89% of all the authors whose articles were published in the year 2000 in those three journals were based in the United States, with a further 9% in Canada. Only four authors from outside North America – one from Hong Kong, one from Taiwan, and two, co-authoring one article, from Israel – made it into the three journals in the year in question. A check of more recent issues of these journals indicates that the year 2000 was not unusual in this respect.

By comparison, both of the non-North American samples display a much greater degree of global spread in terms of authorship. The three journal sub-sample (E3) shows a substantial representation from UK (34%) and Australasian-based (33%) authors. The broader non-North American sample (E14) had 32% of authors based in the UK and 29% in the rest of Europe. Nevertheless, in each case, a substantial minority (13% of E3, 11% of E14) of authors were based in North America. This would suggest that, whereas few non-North American authors seek to

Table 1. Journal articles by country of author

Country	Journal sample (%)		
	NA3	E3	E14
UK		59 (34)	159 (32)
Other Europe		17 (10)	145 (29)
Australasia		57 (33)	79 (16)
USA	132 (89)	20 (12)	43 (9)
Canada	13 (9)	3 (2)	13 (3)
Other	4 (3)	17 (10)	56 (11)
Totals	149 (100)	173 (100)	495 (100)

publish or are successful in publishing in North American higher education journals – or at least in the leading journals examined here – North American authors are rather more interested or successful in publishing outside of North America.

Themes

Table 2 classifies the samples in terms of the eight key themes or issues identified, with all three samples containing examples of each theme. That aside, there are both further similarities and differences in the three samples. In all three, only a relatively small proportion of articles focused on the knowledge theme (3% of NA3, 6% of E3, 2% of E14), and a larger but similar percentage address academic work (15% of NA3, 17% of E3, 14% of E14).

Course design is a leading theme in both non-North American samples (24% of E14, 25% of E3), but somewhat less important in the North American sample (18%). Conversely, the most important theme addressed in the North American sample, the student experience (33% of articles), while still notable, features much less prominently in the other two samples (14% of E3, 10% of E14).

System policy is an important theme in the E14 sample (28%), but much less prevalent in the other two samples (10% of E3, 6% of NA3). This reflects the inclusion within the broader non-North American sample of a number of journals – *European Journal of Education*, *Higher*

Table 2. Journal articles by theme

Theme	Journal sample (%)		
	NA3	E3	E14
Teaching and learning	4 (5)	13 (15)	9 (3)
Course design	14 (18)	22 (25)	75 (24)
Student experience	26 (33)	12 (14)	33 (10)
Quality	2 (3)	5 (6)	28 (9)
System policy	5 (6)	9 (10)	89 (28)
Institutional management	14 (18)	6 (7)	36 (11)
Academic work	12 (15)	15 (17)	44 (14)
Knowledge	2 (3)	5 (6)	5 (2)
Totals	79 (100)	87 (100)	319 (100)

Education in Europe, *Higher Education Policy* – that specialise in this theme. It also helps to explain what might be seen as the relatively high proportion of non-UK European authors – writing in what is likely to be their second or third language – in the E14 sample (see Table 1).

Of course, some variation is to be expected between single year samples of these three groups of journals, particularly those consisting of only three titles each. Studies of North American journals covering a longer timespan (e.g. Silverman 1987; Volkwein et al. 1988; Millam 1991) do indicate a somewhat broader spread of thematic interests; though this is partly a function of the categorisations adopted. Some, perhaps more specialist, interests would, no doubt, be accommodated in the North American context in articles published in other journals. Indeed, some of these interests may be reflected in the articles by North American-based authors published in non-North American based journals.

Levels of analysis

Table 3 categorises the samples in terms of the level at which the analysis within the articles is pitched. In all three samples, two levels – nation and institution – stand out, together accounting for 86% of NA3, 54% of E3 and 61% of E14. As this suggests, however, the North American sample is much more focused on these two levels. In both non-North American samples, considerable interest is also evident in research targeted at the course, system and international levels. Thus,

Table 3. Journal articles by level of analysis

Level of analysis	Journal sample (%)		
	NA3	E3	E14
Individual	1 (1)	3 (3)	5 (2)
Course	2 (3)	13 (15)	42 (13)
Department	1 (1)	6 (7)	12 (4)
Institution	32 (41)	20 (23)	65 (20)
Nation	36 (46)	27 (31)	128 (40)
System	5 (6)	11 (13)	30 (9)
International	2 (3)	7 (8)	37 (12)
Total	79 (100)	87 (100)	319 (100)

while 13% of the broader non-North American sample consisted of articles focusing on the course level, and 12% focused at the international level, the articles published in the North American sample evidenced little interest in these levels (only 3%, or two articles, each). In all three samples, though, relatively little was published pitched at the individual or departmental levels; levels of analysis which could be both sensitive and risky, and which are often also thought of as unimportant.

Method/ologies

Table 4 categorises the samples in terms of the eight methods and/or methodologies identified. It shows that documentary analysis, interviews and multivariate analysis – i.e. the three most common strategies in social research as a whole – dominated in each of the three samples. Thus, 96% of the NA3 sample, 83% of E3 and 79% of E14 took one or other of these approaches.

As in the case of level of analysis, however, the concentration of the North American sample on these method/ologies is more pronounced than for the non-North American samples. Indeed, the single most striking point about Table 4 is that the majority, 62%, of the articles in the North American sample adopted (at least in terms of the categorisation I have developed) just one method/ological approach: surveys and multivariate analysis. This proportion is more than double that in the other two samples. This strong emphasis on (typically fairly ad-

Table 4. Journal articles by method/ology

Method/ology	Journal sample (%)		
	NA3	E3	E14
Documentary analysis	12 (15)	20 (23)	129 (40)
Comparative analysis		2 (2)	22 (7)
Interviews	15 (19)	27 (31)	44 (14)
Multivariate analysis	49 (62)	25 (29)	79 (25)
Conceptual analysis		5 (6)	10 (3)
Phenomenography		3 (3)	1 (0)
Critical perspectives		1 (1)	3 (1)
Biography	3 (4)	4 (5)	31 (10)
Totals	79 (100)	87 (100)	319 (100)

vanced forms of) multivariate and quantitative strategies is confirmed by other studies of the North American higher education literature over the last three decades (Volkwein et al 1988; Millam 1991; Hutchinson and Lovell 2004).

In the non-North American samples, by contrast, smaller but significant numbers of articles employed auto/biographical and observational techniques, or adopted comparative or conceptual analytical approaches. There were also examples, though much fewer in number, of researchers adopting phenomenographical, critical or feminist approaches. No examples of these were found in the North American journals analysed for the year in question, confirming Millam's (1991) finding – examining the three North American journals analysed here, plus two others, over the 1986–1988 period – of very limited engagement with alternative paradigms within higher education research.

Explicitness of method/ological and theoretical engagement

The great majority of the North American sample (92%) was method/ologically explicit, with each article normally containing a section entitled "method", "methodology" or something similar. Interestingly, only one of the three North American journals examined, the *Journal of Higher Education*, made explicit reference to the need to "deal with the methodology employed" in the general guidance given to contributors on the inside back cover. However, aspirant authors looking at previous issues of any of the three journals would have garnered a clear idea that this was what was expected. While the broader non-North American sample showed much less concern (only a minority, 42%, was method/ologically explicit), a different impression is gained if we focus on the E3 sample. Here, the proportion with an explicit method/ological treatment, 80%, is much closer to the level in the North American sample.

A similar pattern is evident when the issue of theoretical engagement is considered. Thus, 57% of the North American sample explicitly engaged with theory, and in 76% of this sample theoretical engagement was either explicit or evident. While these proportions are much lower in the broader non-North American sample, E14 (21% and 37%), in neither case amounting to the majority of the articles published, the smaller non-North American sample presents a different picture, much closer again to the North American pattern (44% and 61%, respectively).

My earlier analysis of the complete non-North American journal sample indicated that there was a relationship between method/ological and theoretical explicitness and the method/ological approach employed:

> Put simply, if you carry out a survey or an interview-based study, it is expected and accepted that you will say something, if only briefly, about the size and characteristics of the sample, and the sampling strategy adopted, but theoretical engagement is not regarded as being so important. In more specialised methodological fields, such as phenomenography and critical analysis (and, indeed, certain forms of multivariate analysis)... both methodological and theoretical engagement are expected. Neither conceptual nor documentary analysts, however, feel a need to spell out and discuss their method/ological approach – they just do it – though the former tend to engage with theory while the latter don't. (Tight 2004b, p. 404)

This suggests that higher education research does not constitute a single field of practice, but rather a series of, somewhat overlapping, sub-fields, each with its own traditions, conventions and practices. In many ways these sub-fields probably have more in common with similar sub-fields, adopting the same method/ological approaches but examining other aspects of the social world, than they do with other sub-fields of higher education research. Given the much greater emphasis in the North American sample on multivariate analysis as a method/ological strategy, it should not, therefore, be surprising to find higher levels of both method/ological and theoretical engagement, and particularly the former, in that sample.

Discussion

To summarise this analysis, compared to the non-North American samples of articles, the North American sample is:

- dominated by North American-based authors,
- more focused on studies of the student experience, and less on system policy,
- more focused on studying the institutional and national levels, and less so on the course and international levels,
- much more focused on the use of multivariate analysis techniques, with less use of biographical, comparative and conceptual forms of analysis, and
- more likely to be both method/ologically and theoretically explicit.

Why then might this be so? What reasons (other than those already mentioned) might be advanced to try and explain these rather divergent patterns, assuming, that is, that they are not simply an artefact of the particular samples being compared (which I do not believe to be the case)?

To focus this discussion, I will advance and examine four related hypotheses:

1. The North American higher education research community is more inward-looking.
2. The North American higher education research community is ahead of higher education researchers in the rest of the world.
3. Quantitative databases are both longer and better established in North American higher education.
4. The North American and non-North American higher education research communities are largely separate.

While other hypotheses might have been added, these four, between them, seem to me to cover most of the key issues raised by the analysis.

One point that needs to be stressed, before we proceed any further, is the problematic nature of such a discussion. Even a quick glance at the four hypotheses outlined above may already have raised the hackles of some readers, whether they are based within or outside North America (and the dichotomous comparison being undertaken is also, inevitably but I hope understandably, simplified). It can be difficult to discuss matters in a comparative context without appearing to stereotype those coming from or working within particular systems, nations or cultures. So let me emphasize that my intention here is not to irritate but to raise questions for debate.

The North American higher education research community is more inward-looking

Lest it be thought that this hypothesis is expressed in too pejorative a fashion, it has to be re-emphasized that the North American higher education system(s) is, by some distance, the largest and most developed in the world. Hence, it might seem perfectly understandable for North American higher education researchers to focus predominantly on their own concerns. It is striking, however, that non-North American journals appear more open – at least, if we interpret the evidence presented in Table 1 in this way – to North American authors (primarily writing

about North American concerns) than North American journals seem to be to non-North American authors. This is not to say that the latter are biased against non-North American authors: they may simply not receive many articles from such sources.

My own personal, but substantial, experience as an editor of higher education journals suggests that many, but by no means all, North American higher education researchers (but most particularly those based in the United States) tend to write without reference to anything – policy, experience, publications – coming from outside North America. But I would have to say that the same tendency can be found amongst many, but by no means all, English (or United Kingdom) higher education researchers, who often display a similar propensity to overlook experience or evidence from outside of their own system. Yet, conversely, this does not seem to be the case to the same extent for higher education researchers based in many European countries or in Australasia.

My explanation for this pattern is threefold. First, there is a system size (and distinctiveness) effect. The larger and more distinctive the higher education system, the more likely it is that higher education researchers working within it will be more inward-looking. Thus, many higher education researchers in both the United States and the United Kingdom betray a tendency to focus chiefly on their own system concerns. By comparison, many of those working within relatively smaller systems, in some cases historically derived from other systems like that of the United Kingdom – such as, say, Australia, the Netherlands or Hong Kong – have a greater tendency to refer to research literatures and experiences from other systems. As a consequence, whether explicitly or otherwise, they are more likely to situate their studies in a more international or comparative context.

My second explanation is linguistic, and recognises that this is a study of academic journals published in the English language. Those working in systems where English is not the first language, but who nevertheless seek to publish at least some of their work in English language journals based within other systems, will perforce tend to engage with English language publications to some degree. Since most of these will not be concerned with their own higher education systems, some comparative engagement is again more likely to take place. Hence, the many authors based in other European countries publishing in the journals included in the broader non-North American sample (E14) tend, or appear, to be less inward-looking.

Third, and closely linked to the two previous explanations, there is a growing European effect (which is discussed further below in the context of the fourth hypothesis advanced). It seems evident that North America offers a higher education system, or systems, large and complex enough to be well worthy of detailed and lengthy study in its own right, and the same might be said, though to a lesser degree, of, for example, the United Kingdom. This is surely also the case, then, if the (expanding) European Union is considered as a whole. The difference, however, is that the European case necessitates some comparative analysis of a substantial number of, albeit slowly converging, higher education systems, and thus appears less inward-looking.

It would be an interesting follow-up study, of course, to examine a sample of non-English language higher education journals to see what they reveal. Another comparative study could usefully examine whether similar patterns are evident in other disciplines or fields of study, and what relationship this has to the maturity of the discipline or field of study concerned.

The North American higher education research community is ahead of higher education researchers in the rest of the world

As already noted, the North American higher education system(s) moved to mass participation before any others, and one effect of this was to stimulate or cause an earlier development of higher education research as a significant activity. It might be argued or expected, therefore, that the North American higher education research community, having effectively had something of a head start, would still be ahead of the rest of the world. Indeed, we might also expect that higher education research in the rest of the world would be likely to draw upon, and develop some of the practices and patterns already evident in, North America.

To an extent, this appears to be the case, at least in terms of sheer scale. There are many more universities in North America where one can go to study higher education in a department or centre expressly devoted to that subject, and the programmes they offer are of longer-standing (Altbach and Engberg 2001). They are probably also better resourced. Relatively speaking, therefore, there are likely to be significantly more dedicated higher education researchers, and thus a stronger internal intellectual community, within North America than in other systems.

But this is not the whole story, particularly if we try to take into account quality as well as quantity. Thus, internationally, those whom we might identify as the leading higher education researchers would be spread across many countries (even if a relatively high number of them are based in North America). They would likely remain the leading higher education researchers, at least for the time being, if they moved between countries, or transferred between North American and non-North American systems. This is evident in the recognition given to such researchers through, for example, invited keynote presentations at leading conferences internationally, and, indeed, through their publication in both North American and non-North American journals. Again, however – though I have no direct evidence for this at present – it may be the case that leading North American higher education researchers are held in greater esteem outside North America than are leading non-North American researchers within North America.

The greater method/ological and theoretical explicitness evident in the North American journal sample might be taken as further evidence of the greater sophistication of North American higher education researchers. Caution should be observed here, however, and not just because of the link between method/ological approach and method/ological and theoretical explicitness already noted. On the one hand, the more "elite" non-North American sample analysed (E3) showed a similar level of method/ological and theoretical engagement (while exhibiting greater method/ological diversity) to the elite North American sample. And, on the other hand, if the analysis was extended to a broader range of North American journals, a less explicit degree of engagement might well be found. It might also be the case, of course, that the greater degree of method/ological and theoretical explicitness found in the North American sample was a consequence of a rather different academic culture: i.e. a different view of what is deemed to be the "proper" way to carry out and then write up research for publication.

If the North American higher education research community is regarded as being, at least in some ways, ahead of non-North American communities, this does not mean that the latter are likely to adopt the practices and lessons of the former without question. This is suggested by the general policy transfer literature (see, for example, Hulme 2000). System context is an important factor, and practitioners may be resistant to learning from the experience of other systems or institutions.

Quantitative databases are both longer and better established in North American higher education

As with the previous hypothesis, there is a clear relationship here with the massification of higher education systems. Put simply, the larger a system becomes, the more likely it is that all parties involved – policy-makers, managers, researchers, etc. – will make increasing use of quantitative databases in order to understand, evaluate and change practice. As massification came first to North America, it was also associated with the early development – at national, regional, state or province, and institutional levels – of more and more complex quantitative databases. These databases contained information on, for example, finances, institutional performance and student evaluations.

So far as higher education research is concerned, the greater use of such databases in North America can be explained by a series of supporting (even self-fulfilling) tendencies. First and foremost, perhaps, is the continued preference and respect accorded by most concerned parties – both within and outside North America – to large-scale, rigorous, replicable, "objective", "scientific" and positivist forms of research, best exemplified in multivariate analyses of quantitative databases. Set against this, qualitative and critical approaches to research may seem far less desirable (and fundable).

In such a context, researching and understanding the higher education system would necessitate, to an increasing degree, understanding and researching the associated quantitative databases. Hence a growing cadre of higher education researchers conversant and confident with multivariate analysis techniques would develop (see Hutchinson and Lovell 2004). The availability, importance and greater respectability of multivariate research opportunities would, thereby, be further reinforced, and would, at the same time, discourage any comparable development of other approaches.

Of course, such quantitative databases exist, and are also increasing in importance, in non-North American higher education systems. As Table 4 indicated, there are significant numbers of higher education researchers in these systems applying multivariate research techniques to their analysis. And many key actors within these systems – including, most notably, policy makers and institutional managers – rely heavily on such analyses, and accord them considerable respect. Yet, as the analysis presented here suggests, other research strategies are also well embedded outside North America. So, while it is to be expected that the importance of multivariate strategies will increase, I would not expect

them to assume as dominant a position in the foreseeable future amongst non-North American higher education researchers.

The North American and non-North American higher education research communities are largely separate

A counter argument to this hypothesis would be that developed higher education systems throughout the world are encouraging and experiencing increasing levels of both staff and student mobility; though, as yet, this is probably not that significant a trend in the relatively small, but developing, field of higher education research. Of course, some contact and communication continues, particularly for academic researchers, in the form of journal and conference contributions, particularly so in the case of comparative researchers (which accounts for part of the North American contribution to journals based outside North America).

Outside North America, there are strong pressures to retain and further develop existing linkages across higher education (and higher education research), much as in the case with other aspects of economy and society. Historically, these have manifested themselves through colonial and post-colonial relationships: which does, of course, account for continuing linkages between the UK, Canada, Australia and other Commonwealth systems. Contemporarily, as already noted, there is a growing policy momentum within the European Union to standardise and align higher education system practices – and encourage staff and student mobility – leading to greater and greater liaison between both researchers and practitioners in the systems concerned.

Though it might be concluded, therefore, that the North American and non-North American higher education research communities remain largely, but by no means wholly, separate at the present time, two factors may be expected to reduce this separation in the years to come. One of these factors is the continuing development to be expected in the field of higher education research itself, which is likely – as in more established disciplines – to lead to greater international exchange. The other factor – linked to the point already made about increasing staff and student mobility – is all of those trends bound up within what is called globalisation (Scott 1998).

Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article has shown significant differences, as well as many similarities, in the articles published in specialist higher education journals in the year 2000 inside and outside North America. The most striking differences were the virtually total dominance of North American authors in the North American journals, and the much greater emphasis placed in those journals on multivariate forms of analysis.

In an attempted explanation of these patterns, it was suggested that the North American higher education research community, being larger and longer developed than others, is more inward-looking than many others. Similarly, multivariate analysis may be held in higher regard in North America because of the longer-standing development of large-scale quantitative databases there. In these circumstances, it might well be expected that the North American higher education research community would remain somewhat separate from the parallel communities in the rest of the world.

What, then, are the implications of this analysis? Or, to put it more pithily, does it really matter? My answer, perhaps unsurprisingly but also somewhat annoyingly, is both no and yes. No, because a healthy higher education research community has clearly developed in North America, and is in the process of developing in other parts of the world. Yes, because, when seen in a broader perspective, higher education research remains a field of study in need of significant further development everywhere. In such circumstances, greater liaison between higher education researchers in all systems is surely to be encouraged.

But I see no reason not to be cautiously optimistic that such developments will occur, and that the divide or divides implied by the title of this article will be bridged. The somewhat unconnected patterns identified in this article are characteristic of fields of study or disciplines in relatively early stages of development. The pressures associated with what could be seen as the somewhat inevitable further development of the field – coming from stakeholders such as national and international policy-makers, institutional managers and existing researchers, as well as academic publishers – are likely to lead to greater mutual sharing, understanding and liaison between systems.

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