

From the Editors

Another higher education journal: *Really?*

Does the higher education research community really need another research journal? Have we not reached a saturation point, with numerous well-established, highly regarded journals, and continuous announcements about new journals appearing in our email inboxes? Why would any scholar consider becoming involved in yet another review, special issue, or especially another ‘most recent APA update’? What could possibly be gained from aiming for the introduction of another international, higher education research journal?

Such questions are not to be taken lightly. The *JPHE*'s¹ editorial team, comprised of scholars who share a concern for the current state of affairs in higher education, has deliberated seriously over these questions. We recognise the longstanding contribution of many existing journals but also suggest that there are neglected challenges and tensions requiring deeper and far more critical dialogue than is typical within many higher education settings across the globe. We have come to the conclusion that there is a need for a journal dedicated to creating a forum for, and informing, such dialogue. This is arguably important if new possibilities, insights, and pathways are to emerge that can help us address and/or negotiate those challenges we see, experience, and face in higher education practices today.

In this editorial, we aim to elaborate on some of the problems and tensions that have prompted us to establish *JPHE*, and use this as a backdrop for outlining the journal's ambitions, focus, and choice of ‘praxis’ as a central concept and base. We also provide some brief comments on the first issue contributions, and offer some hopes, possibilities, and perhaps provocations for future issues.

Tensions across global higher education

Higher education studies have long been a feature across many disciplines. In addition, they have also established traditions, institutional grounding, and several professional associations across the globe serving policy-makers, scholars, and stakeholders focused on higher education (Clark, 1983; Schwarz & Teichler,

¹ Journal of Praxis in Higher Education

2000; Tight, 2012). However, despite the sustained focus on higher education as a social institution, its unique set of organisations, and interrelated professions, highly challenging tensions pervading higher education at an international level remain. They include the contrast between higher education as part of critical scholarly ecosystems *versus* higher education as uncritical echo chambers (Zackaria, 2017; Barnett, 2019); higher education as an inclusive and open public good *versus* higher education as an exclusive commodity existing for the profit of very few (Angervall & Beach, 2017; Robertson, 2018; Gibbs, et al., 2019); higher education experienced as neo-colonial and culturally racialised *versus* higher education experienced as a space in which postcolonialism is embodied in decolonial scholarly practices (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991; Lentin, 2008; Takayama et al., 2017); and higher education as taking into account multipolar and multiple knowledge claims *versus* higher education as increasingly adhering to Euro- and US-centric biases in all aspects of scholarship (Danvers, 2018; Naidoo, 2016; Shahjahan, 2016).

These tensions are currently being exacerbated by a twin set of inward-looking conflicts that are not difficult to locate in higher education studies. First, there is a tension caused by an absence of dialogical scholarly respect across generations. Where this exists, we note it remains exacerbated by unwarranted expectations of one-way deference, grounded in paternalistic hierarchical logic (Hoffman & Horta, 2016; Pashby, 2015). Second, despite pretensions of scholarly cosmopolitanism, it is not difficult to find this squarely at odds with methodological nationalism (Beck, 1992, 2007; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). These complex tensions cannot be wished away by higher education policy makers, researchers, or stakeholders. Most importantly, their complex juxtapositions obscure a widely recognised and perhaps the most enduring tension within higher education systems: transformational social justice *versus* the reproduction of social inequalities. This tension is also paradoxically unifying in the sense that it is increasingly felt across continents, in countries, cultures, and communities. Related to these points, an interesting, and often ignored, question is the role that higher education currently plays in causing these very tensions (Gibbs et al., 2019; Robertson, 2015). Introducing a journal focused on engaging with these tensions and raising important critical questions about higher education seems like the least we can do.

The journal's mission

The key ambition of *JPHE* is to facilitate a wider discussion of the tensions we have highlighted above, contextualising and connecting local and national arenas,

as well as conversations within interest groups, practice communities, scholarly traditions, and disciplines. Our aim is to contribute to critical debate by creating a forum for problematising current higher education practices and conditions: highlighting injustices and unsustainable arrangements, from a variety of perspectives. A more global debate is important, even crucial we suggest, in order for higher education communities and interested parties to better understand, navigate, and engage in unconstructive tensions; in other words, to evolve in terms of situated societal relevance, along with allowing for being appropriately and imaginatively responsive.

We have chosen the central theme of ‘praxis’ with this in mind. The very idea of the journal was originally driven by the hopes and potential of creating possibilities for enacting and critiquing praxis. Higher education has historically changed—and continues to be changed by—society (Bourdieu, 1988). This is nothing new, but we argue that re-centring a wider discussion of praxis within higher education is needed if we want to engage, in generative ways, in issues, topics, ideas, and potentials that are increasingly missing or missed in contemporary higher education.

So what is praxis? We acknowledge that ‘praxis’ is a contested term, not least because it is used interchangeably with ‘practice’ in some contexts, or strongly associated with particular kinds of research, such as action research. Rather than risk narrowing debate about praxis, however, we refrain from providing a single definition. Instead, we raise what we see as key elements of human activity that the term praxis captures, and that we wish to facilitate in this journal. One concerns thoughtful (see Freire, 1970/2008) or informed action (Kemmis & Smith, 2008).² Another concerns ‘moral-social-political aspects of human activity’³, which takes into account, for example, power, policy, social regulations, and agency.

The journal’s focus on the theme of praxis is intended to reignite debate about the moral-social-political dimensions of higher education and attention to the consequences of what has been and is being done, as well as the role of reflection, reflexivity, and different kinds of knowledges in enabling informed and morally-sensitive and socially just action. In this sense, the theme of praxis in higher education is arguably relevant for all disciplines and cuts across all higher education practices. Our open invitation to broadly think about or even re-think praxis aims at what we believe is currently missing from established ‘discourses in place’ (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 14) and higher education’s ‘practice architectures’ (Kemmis et al., 2014; see also Kemmis & Mahon, 2017). Lastly,

² Intentional, reflexive or theoretically informed action (see Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Some also see this as connected to practical wisdom or *phronesis* (see Aristotle, 2011).

³ See Durkheim, 2006; Bourdieu, 1988, Harding, 1994.

praxis, as a theme, has implications for the way we can understand universities as a public ‘good’ (Nixon, 2011; Pusser et al., 2012), and/or keeping alive debates about what constitutes the ‘good’ (and for whom) in any given society and historical moment.

The first issue contributions

This is the first issue of *JPHE*. We have reached the point where we have to ask whether this first issue offers what we intended, or even if the contributions vouch for ‘the need of another higher education journal’. More submissions went through the reviewer process than we expected. Therefore, we hope that several, which were not quite ready for the first issue, will be re-submitted. These articles represent an exciting mix of focus areas, research objectives, theoretical lines, and conceptions. They are all critical, nuanced, and one could say daring, but in very different ways.

The first article, ‘A conceptual enquiry into communities of practice as praxis in international doctoral education’ by Liexu Cai, Dangeni, Dely L. Elliot, Rui He, Jianshu Liu, Kara A. Makara, Emily-Marie Pacheco, Hsin-Yi Shih, Wenting Wang, and Jie Zhang embodies ‘communities of practice’ in a well-sourced, highly accessible conceptualisation. This well-written collaboration sheds light on a key topic that many doctoral-level coordinators may be missing, especially when it comes to the support of doctoral students, in general, and international doctoral students in particular. This article is a ‘must read’ for doctoral students, doctoral program coordinators, and research team leaders leaning heavily of doctoral students. Further, the highly intuitive conceptualisation offers a solid point of departure for higher education specialists and doctoral programme coordinators alike who want to push back the boundaries and test assumptions about the difference between cutting-edge doctoral support and ‘everything else’.

The second article, ‘Organising the “industrialisation of instruction”: Pedagogical discourses in the Swedish Primary Teacher Education programme’ by Lena Sjöberg, explores the relationship between policy and praxis through an interesting analysis of pedagogical discourses and material conditions in a particular teacher education context. It usefully highlights how teacher educators’ practices within this context are mediated by neoliberal and bureaucratic rationalities, using some striking examples which university educators in other contexts may recognise, such as lecturers being ‘traded’ between departments, and the commodification and atomisation of courses. The implications for student learning and collaborative work amongst teacher educators make this an

important contribution to knowledge about the conditions and possibilities for praxis in teacher education, and potentially, higher education more broadly, especially with respect to policy and policy enactment.

The third article, ‘The work of research administrators: Praxis and professionalization’ by Sandra Acker, Michelle K. McGinn, and Caitlin Campisi, is based on a highly relevant study about a relatively new group of professionals in higher education. The article offers interesting insights into research administrators’ perceptions of their professional identity and into this field’s professionalisation efforts. The results illustrate how research administrators have defined for themselves a praxis dedicated to easing the burdens of academics, helping one another, and contributing to the greater good of the university and the research enterprise. The discussion serves to broaden our understanding of the pressures and demands in contemporary higher education institutions but also of how this particular group is actively establishing a new, but also complex, professional field. For example, the research administrators in this study help academics to conform to expectations of performance, even though they also make working life more bearable and rewarding.

The digitalisation of society and education are in focus in the *fourth article* by Anna Roumbanis Viberg, Karin Forslund Frykedal, and Sylvana Sofkova Hashemi, titled ‘Teacher educators’ perceptions of their profession in relation to the digitalization of society’. Studies on the affordances and challenges of teaching in a digital age are not new. However, this article particularly highlights the demands on a particular group of university educators—namely teacher educators—whose pedagogical work traverses two educational arenas, and two sets of teaching practices: their own and the teaching practices of the students in their teacher education programmes. The article offers important insights into tensions experienced by teacher educators related to their sense of isolation, lack of support, and their relationship to digital tools. The discussion prompts readers to consider what these tensions mean for the teacher educators’ sense of self and their possibilities for engaging with technology in a critically reflective way. In this respect, and many others, the article is relevant beyond the teacher education context.

On future issues

When creating something new, we always start from something familiar. There is of course a value in tradition and convention, as it is the continuities of higher education that explain and form its unique, institutional, organisational, and professional character across the globe, as well as its strengths and potential

(Hoffman & Välimaa et al., 2016). However, the key tension highlighted by continuity, convention, and tradition in higher education (and research) is discontinuity, challenges, and change. Therefore, *JPHE* will inevitably evolve, based on our own understandings of higher education, and our editorial team taking tensions in our focus genuinely. We hope the evolution of the journal entails attention to tensions found in higher education that are often reproduced in its journals, either through content or editorial and review processes (or both). Thus, our ambition is that *JPHE*'s style, process, and content will, over time, push the boundaries of 'the academic journal' in the interests of promoting scholarly integrity and debate, broadening access to important ideas and research, and encouraging diverse and interesting perspectives.

To this end, we have established the journal as an online, open access, not-for-profit journal with a triple blind review system and a commitment to quick 'turnarounds'. We are currently considering possibilities for future issues, such as the opportunity for authors to publish in both English and other languages, or to present their research/scholarly work in novel ways. In the near future, we also hope to broaden both our editorial team and reviewer base. These features and aims are necessary if our intentions and ambitions with this journal are to be taken seriously.

For future issues, rather than coming down on one side or another of the tensions we highlight above, we are actually hoping for articles that are well-argued, including those that make a case for what might be considered outdated conventions, that highlight the necessity of unpopular policies, or with which the editors do not agree. We are especially interested in contributions that address the tension between what higher education *all too often is* versus what it *could be* in a curiosity-driven, constructive, yet critical and creative way. Therefore, we encourage and seek out sustained dialogue regarding different contested spaces of higher education that are relevant and responsive to praxis. The voices of actors often missing from, or marginalised in, higher education debate will be particularly welcomed. Such contributions, we believe, will serve as essential resources for helping those in higher education communities rethink the current state of affairs, and imagine how higher education might be otherwise, in their own settings, and globally. Hence, and to conclude, we return to our opening question: 'Does the higher education research community *really* need another higher education journal?' Our answer must be *Yes!*

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