Higher Education in the Networked Knowledge Society: Challenges for Impact Evaluation of Quality Management

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Ideas developed in
Key challenges

- How to explain the different ways HEIs are connected with their societies?

- How can Quality Assurance help to serve the needs of HEIs and society?
HEIs, traditionally

- **Elite HE**: reproduction of social structures, **no need for quality assurance**
- **Mass HE**: production of qualified labor force, expansion of societal expectations (social mobility, productivity & innovations), increasing institutional hierarchies => need to check that the resources are used efficiently & goals for HE are achieved ⇔ quality assurance
Contemporary situation (1): Social selection & stratification

- **High Participation Systems** of higher education (HPS) (Marginson 2016)
- More than 50 nations have exceeded 50% participation rate, a global phenomenon
- Yet, **social inequalities** in access to higher education persist: elite HEIs getting stronger, low-status HEIs becoming overcrowded, institutional hierarchies (stratification) getting steeper
Unless...

- **State interferes**: Nordic (Continental) HE vs. Anglo-American market-driven HE
- One of the potential instruments for state interference & institutional development (& academic drift) is **Quality Assurance**

=> How it works? => Impact evaluations
Contemporary situation (2): drivers of social changes ↔ HE

- The use of knowledge is increasing in all spheres of society (industry, business, NGOs, state machinery, families, individuals …)
- Traditional hierarchies are challenged by networks & networking
- Information technology (ICT) has the potential to create new social spaces & support (emerging) social movements
How to explain contemporary societies – in relation to HE & QA?

Social changes; three families of explanations:

1) **Knowledge-focused** (Knowledge society (Stehr) & Knowledge economy (Hayek… Becker))

2) **ICT-focused** (information society, networked mobile society)

3) **Network-focused** (ANT (Latour), Rhizomes (Deleuze & Guattari), Communication Power (Castells))
Main problems with these (sociological) families of theories

- **Knowledge Society** does not take seriously enough the means of communication (ICT) & emerging new social forms (networks)
- **Mobile Network Society & Information society** emphasize ICT too much as a source of change
- **Network theories** do not pay enough attention to the contents of communication (knowledge)
=> Networked Knowledge Societies

Contemporary societies: neither knowledge societies nor network societies but both describe elements of social realities ↔ social change & HE:

1) CONTENT: The production & need & use of knowledge

2) MEDIUM: Information technology (ICT)

3) SOCIAL FORM: Networking as the social form of communication & knowledge production
CONTENT / Knowledge

- The content of information and communication is important matter in itself.
- Knowledge needs to be taken seriously as the core element in contemporary societies.
- The quantity and quality of the needs for most up-dated knowledge is a new phenomenon. Research and HEIs are crucially important.
ICT has helped to re-define the categories of time & space ⇔ identity, social forms, society

However, institutions & social structures continue to frame social choice & communication choice

HEIs may act as important nodes of knowledge networks because of their intellectual & material resources
Networking as the social form of knowledge production based on social relationships

Networks are the most efficient way to organize multiple & flexible academic, business and social partnership relations

New forms of knowledge production: knowledge is produced in networks of partnerships & cooperation with academics (universities) + actors outside HEIs
How to combine HEIs & networks theoretically?

- Formal hierarchical organizations have not disappeared ⇔ challenged by networks ⇒ organisations & networks are co-existing, cooperating social forms in need of each other
- The tensions between global, national and local makes universities essential in NKS
- A useful metaphor: rhizomes (logic) + tree-like organizations (structure)
Trees and Rhizomes?

Academic networks as rhizomes?
Empirical realities...

- **Multiple & increasing expectations** on HEIs from:
  1) **civic society** (public debate, NGOs, local communities),
  2) **state organisations** (ministries, laws & regulations),
  3) **industry & business** (innovations, labour force)

- **Inside HEIs: actors** (academics, students, managers),
  **processes** (teaching, learning, management, QA),
  **functions** (research, teaching, management, socialization)
**Universtasis** as way forward?

- **Universitas + statis** (balance, greek)
- **CHALLENGE**: how to find a **dynamic balance** between different stakeholders’ conflicting needs & expectations, institutional processes, academic work, & traditions of disciplines?

- **Universtasis** is a **space and a place**, a **process and a structure** where societal needs & expectations meet **academic networks** supported by **institutional infrastructure & hierarchies**
Challenges for QA in NKS?

Quality Assurance:
1) *serve different needs* (recognise them in each national / local / institutional context)
2) *be open* concerning its goals, purposes & processes
3) *be open* to use a variety of evaluation / assessment instruments
4) *be explicit* with the use of the evaluation outcomes (see Stensaker & Leiber 2016)
Actor-network analysis as a challenge for impact evaluations?

- Main challenge: HEIs are networked & hierarchical places (complex organizations)

=> From reconstructions of (causal) social mechanisms into actor-network-analyses: 1) "follow the actors"; 2) pay attention to human & non-human actors; 3) take chance & context seriously; 4) leave "network causality" behind => pay attention to QA processes crossing organisation(al levels), networks, hierarchies
Thank you!